

interzone

DECEMBER 1999

Number 150

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James Lovegrove

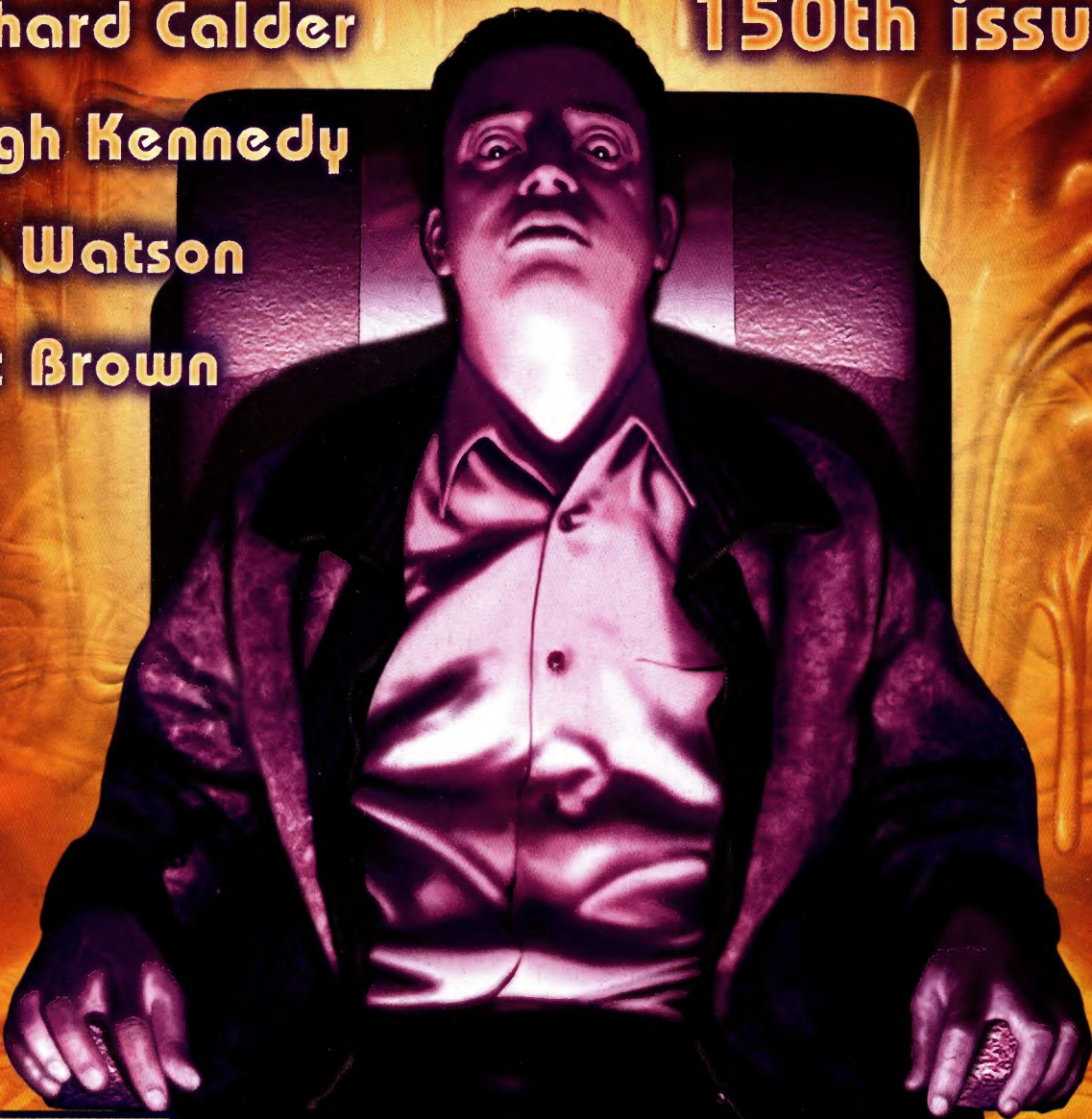
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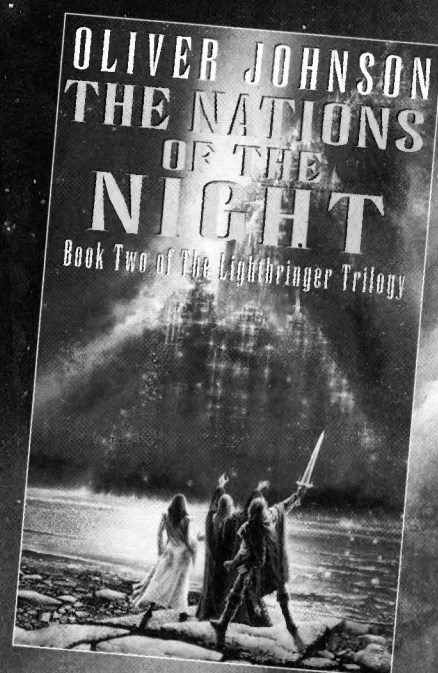
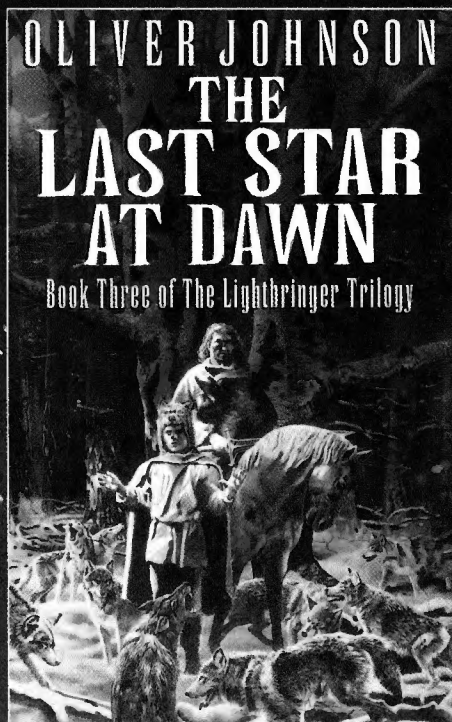
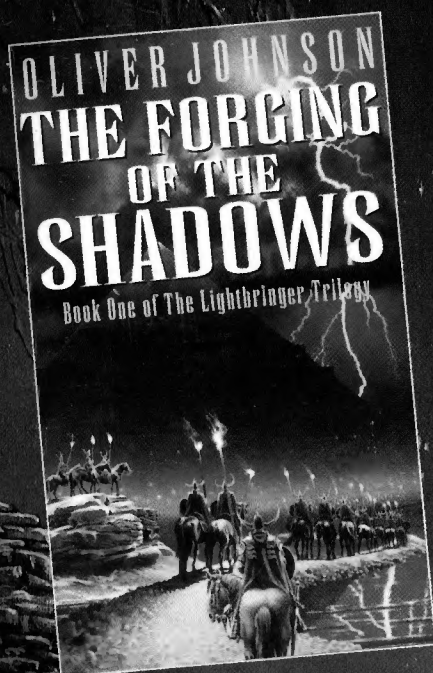
150th issue!



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interzone

science fiction & fantasy

DECEMBER 1999

Number 150

CONTENTS

Fiction

IMPAKTO

Richard Calder

Illustrations by Dominic Harman

6

THE DESCENT

Ian Watson

17

THE BICYCLE WAY

Leigh Kennedy

27

TERMINAL EVENT

James Lovegrove

31

FOOTPRINTS IN THE SNOW

Jean-Claude Dunyach

37

THE PEOPLE OF THE NOVA

Eric Brown

41

Features

INTERACTION

Readers' Letters

4

TRAVELLING IN BLUE

Alison Sinclair interviewed by David Mathew

27

ANSIBLE LINK

News by David Langford

40

JAMES WHITE: AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Graham Andrews

49

**BIG DUMB OPTICALS: FILM CONSIDERED AS
THE MOTION PYRAMID**

Gary Westfahl

49

BOOK REVIEWS

*Paul J. McAuley, Chris Gilmore, David Mathew, and
Paul Brazier*

55

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INTERFACE

The 150th issue of *Interzone*!

In a guest editorial, introducing issue 150 of *New Worlds* (edited by Michael Moorcock, May 1965), former editor John Carnell (familiarily known as Ted Carnell) began by saying: "The 150th issue of *New Worlds SF*! A monument to British science fiction with nearly 1,000 stories already published within its pages, containing over 7,000,000 words..."

Interzone has published fewer than 1,000 stories in its 150 issues, but not so very many fewer – about 800, we think, and our total wordage of fiction we estimate at over five million words. A good record for a time, the 1980s and 1990s, when fiction magazines of any kind have struggled for survival and have tended to be short-lived.

Carnell went on to say of *New Worlds*: "More than 30 book-length serials and over 150 contributing authors have appeared within its variegated covers since that first diffident issue in October 1946." *Interzone* can't compete with that record of book-length serials, but over the years it has published a number of short serials, two-parters, almost all of which have subsequently appeared in book form (usually expanded). They include Greg Bear's *Heads*, Geoff Ryman's award-winning *The Child Garden* and Brian Stableford's *The Hunger and Ecstasy of Vampires*, as well as significant parts of Eugene Byrne & Kim Newman's *Back in the USSA* and Paul Di Filippo's *The Steampunk Trilogy*.

When it comes to the total number of contributing authors, though, we can claim to have done a little better than *New Worlds*. This magazine has published more than 250 authors of fiction in its 150-issue span, a majority of them British but many of them American, Australian, Canadian or

from other parts of the world (we have published, for example, a Filipino author, two Japanese and three Czechs). That high total, and the diversity of writers, are pleasing.

In his *New Worlds* boast, Ted Carnell continued in fine mixed-metaphor style: "A minor galaxy of literary names who have cast long shadows across the face of SF literature have embroidered its contents pages: new writers who went on to become stars – Arthur C. Clarke, John Christopher, Charles Eric Maine, Brian W. Aldiss, John Wyndham, J. G. Ballard, J. T. McIntosh." Well, two of those stellar names, Maine and McIntosh, are now semi-forgotten, but of the remainder *Interzone* has published some of the later work of three great survivors – Aldiss, Ballard and Christopher. More to the point, we can come up with our own "minor galaxy" of new names, writers of recent vintage who have gone on to a wider fame. They include Stephen Baxter, Scott Bradfield, Eric Brown, Molly Brown, Richard Calder, Greg Egan, Nicola Griffith, Paul J. McAuley, Ian R. MacLeod, Kim Newman and Geoff Ryman, among many others who have begun to make significant careers for themselves within the past 17 years.

"Few are the 'greats' who have not at one time graced its pages," said Carnell of *New Worlds*, "and innumerable are the unknowns who have come and gone yet still left their mark." We can say exactly the same of *Interzone*. Some of the "greats" who have contributed new fiction to this magazine's pages more than once include (in addition to Aldiss and Ballard): Gregory Benford, Michael Bishop, David Brin, Ramsey Campbell, the late Angela Carter, Storm Constantine, Thomas M. Disch, Karen Joy Fowler, Mary Gentle, William Gibson, M. John Harrison, Robert Holdstock, Gwyneth Jones, Graham Joyce, Garry Kilworth, David Langford, Jonathan Lethem, Ian McDonald, Michael Moorcock, Paul Park, Keith Roberts, Kim Stanley Robinson, the late Bob Shaw, John Sladek, Brian Stableford, Bruce Sterling, Lisa Tuttle and Ian Watson. We are immensely grateful to them for enriching the fiction in this magazine – and to all the other "name" authors who have appeared here only once.

But, as with *New Worlds*, it's the lesser-known authors who have formed the real backbone of the magazine – particularly the "up-and-comers," some of whom have already gone on to publish elsewhere, even to sell novels, but have yet to make major names for themselves outside our pages. There are dozens of them, far too many to begin to list, but they

know who they are. The emergence of those people, along with the more established new names mentioned above, is this magazine's main justification for existence. When we began publication in 1982 it was our principal aim to nurture new writers of talent within the broad fields of science fiction and fantasy, just as *New Worlds* (and its sister magazine *Science Fantasy*) had under Carnell and others, and I hope it is not too immodest of me to say that we feel we have succeeded in doing what we set out to do.

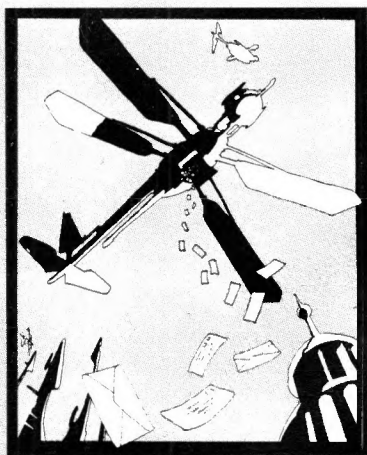
(At this point, it is perhaps fitting to give additional thanks all round – to various past editors and assistant editors, to our regular non-fiction contributors, to our printers and designers and typesetters – but with a collective enterprise like a monthly magazine, and especially one which has reached 150 issues, it's hard to know how to be comprehensive enough within a limited space. Yes, thanks to all those people, and thanks to the Arts Council of England for supporting us for so many years now. Thanks also to *Interzone*'s lifetime subscribers, who have been generous with their money, and to all those ordinary subscribers who have renewed their subscriptions time and again. Thanks to our responsive readers, the letter-writers and advice-givers, and to the quieter majority who have simply gone on buying the magazine month after month. Thanks all round!)

But there is still much more to be done. When Ted Carnell wrote his guest editorial early in 1965, *New Worlds* was just entering one of its most exciting periods – in the following five years or so, under Michael Moorcock, it was to become a much more famous and influential magazine than it had ever been before. Parallels between the two magazines may break down at this point, but let us hope, on the eve of the year 2000, that a little of the cultural success achieved by *New Worlds* may also come the way of *Interzone*. At the same time, let's hope we don't repeat the older magazine's mistakes – assuming that its mistakes were ever separable from its achievements. Our next issue, by the way, continuing this 150th issue-cum-Millennial celebration, is a "special" dedicated to Mike Moorcock on his 60th birthday.

David Pringle

Dear Editors:

I can't be the only reader to despair at the comments about science fiction quoted by Dave Langford in his column. Some may feel the same when that kind of thing is said about horror fiction. At least one of us feels similarly over David Lee Stone's aversion to reviewing *Kimota 9* because "it was



INTERACTION

a horror special" (*Interzone* 148, page 60). For the record, my little essay in it had some fun with the ways writers are regarded. Mr Stone has my permission to substitute "science" for "horror" wherever it appears in the piece in case he then enjoys it.

With my best wishes –
Ramsey Campbell
Wallasey, Merseyside

Dear Editors:

I always enjoy "Ansible Link" (especially "Thog's Masterclass"), and issue 148 was no exception. However, the "As Others See Us" sidebar gave me pause for thought.

At the tail-end of 1999, do we really care what Brian Sewell, Jeremy Paxman or the *Literary Review* think about sf? If the "sf editor" joke mentioned on page 65 is for real, then these people are such blinkered, ignorant cretins that I don't care about their opinions of *anything*, and I certainly don't want to offer them an olive branch. These people are élitist snobs, who don't have any relevance to the vast majority of people who have to work 9-to-5, raise children and pay taxes. You know – the people who actually *buy* books and movie tickets.

What I always loved about speculative fiction, apart from its political and philosophical mythologizing, was the fact that it was a popular genre, which moved millions of people *despite* what the *TLS* et al said about it. I see it as much as a popular movement, a social force, as a form of fiction.

It seems to me that sf has to make a choice:

Either, it is going to cross over to the academic élite, in which case it will have to put up with being judged by the same standards as other books, by people who may not be as indulgent as 30-somethings who grew up reading Isaac Asimov.

Or, it can get back in touch with its

populism. Instead of complaining about Philip Kerr's success and apologizing for its own existence, presumably in the forlorn hope that the *Literary Review* will start taking it seriously, the sf community can stand up and say, "We're here, we're valuable, and we don't care if you approve of us or not." SF Pride, if you like. Sf should take a leaf out of hip-hop's book – turn other people's ignorance of us into exclusivity, and turn exclusivity into a selling point. We should stick together, assert ourselves and make sf hip, sexy and cool again. Put all these pointless "is it genre or not?" arguments to bed once and for all. Stop worrying whether every new writer knows the entire editorial history of *Astounding*. Instead of being paranoid about other media, use movies, TV and games as a hook to drag people in. As far as I can tell, sf is completely intrinsic to, and accepted within, pop culture, and instead of complaining about TV debasing our precious genre, we should use it: I can't see any reason why someone who's into *Alien Nation* or *Earth: Final Conflict* wouldn't enjoy Ian McDonald's *Sacrifice of Fools*. Instead of complaining about *The Truman Show* ripping off Philip K. Dick, lay a PKD novel on someone. They might like it, they might not, but it sure beats whimpering and making puppy-dog eyes at the *TLS*. *2000AD* is one of the biggest-selling weeklies in the UK, and publishes some damn fine speculative fiction, so I don't accept that there's no popular audience for quality sf.

Populism is not a matter of "dumbing down" (which is generally a fallacious argument anyway, since the charge is usually levelled by people who grew up watching the Three Stooges and believing every word Lord Beaverbrook allowed to see print): it's a matter of selling ourselves, playing the game, and making sure everybody gets well.

A new century is about to start, and I think sf should drop some of its baggage with it. Where Jeff Noon, J.G. Ballard, Thomas Pynchon and Iain Banks (whose best sf books are not the ones with the "M" on the covers) have been, others can follow. But they can't do it until we end the old terminological arguments, stop apologizing for ourselves, and take that bloody big chip off our shoulders.

Sefton Disney
*Taunton,
 Somerset*

Dear Editors:

It is with great sadness that I have to report the death of Liverpool sf artist Eddie Jones. Eddie suffered a heart attack/stroke and spent his remaining time hospitalized where he arrested during a blood transfusion in the early hours of Friday, 15th October 1999. He was 64.

The only visitors he had at the hospital – and the only people who knew he was ill – were his landlords and friends Barbara and Colin O'Loughlin. There are no known relatives. Sadly, there were no funds for any funeral, but after I notified his German agent Thomas Schlück, Tom phoned and offered to pay the funeral expenses.

Eddie was one of the most prolific – and in my opinion one of the best – sf artists in the 1970s. His first book covers were for the notorious Badger Books, starting with *Space-Borne* by R. L. Fanthorpe (1959). By the early '70s, he was having work published in the US, the UK and Germany. At his most prolific he was painting eight commissions per month – mainly for Sphere, Futura and Pan here in the UK, DAW and Bantam in the US, and Bastei and Fischer Orbit in Germany, where he also painted the covers for *Terra Astra* magazine. In the 1980s I used Eddie's work on all 25 of the Venture SF series from Hamlyn/Arrow, using a mixture of reprints from German paperbacks and originals painted for friends, conventions, etc.

For the last 10-15 years he had moved out of the sf field and spent his time painting military figures for a model shop in Liverpool. A regular convention attendee from the mid-'50s through to the '80s, he made an unexpected appearance at this year's Eastercon in Liverpool, where he was surprised that anyone in sf remembered his artwork or his name.

Tom Schlück has expressed a wish that a memorial fund be started to keep Eddie's name and work alive. he was the only great name of the '70s never to have had a book devoted to his work – although many pieces of his work appeared in general books

on sf art. Perhaps that omission can now be corrected. Tom has also asked me if I will oversee the fund. I am happy to do that. Anyone wishing to send donations should send them to me care of Andromeda Bookshop, 2-5 Suffolk Street, Birmingham B1 1LT, UK. Cheques, etc., to be made out to "The Eddie Jones Memorial Fund."

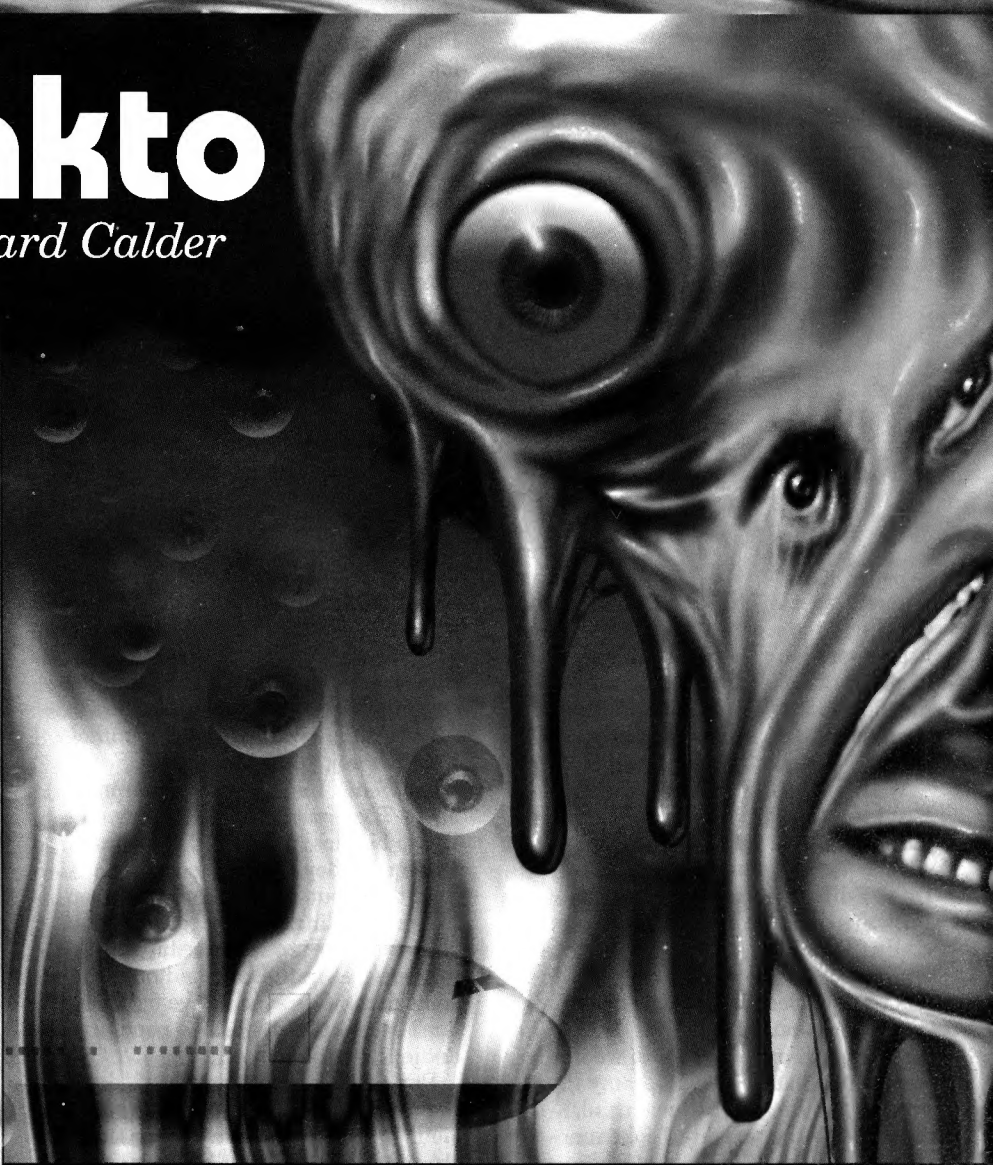
Roger Peyton
*Andromeda Bookshop,
 Birmingham*



Eddie Jones

Impakto

Richard Calder



I

ALWAYS GET THE PSYCHO.

At check-in, before joining the queue, I scrutinize my fellow passengers with foreboding. There is, I know, one amongst their number who, should they be allocated a seat adjacent to my own, will make a long, uncomfortable flight night intolerable. However much I loiter, only joining the queue when I believe that the people before me seem nominally sane, I invariably find, on boarding, that someone unfamiliar and unwanted is seated to my immediate left or right. Someone who, before the flight is over, will reveal themselves to be a madman.

But one grasps at straws. And that day, despite the June heat, and the inadequate ventilation in Terminal 3, I was buoyed by a modicum of hope.

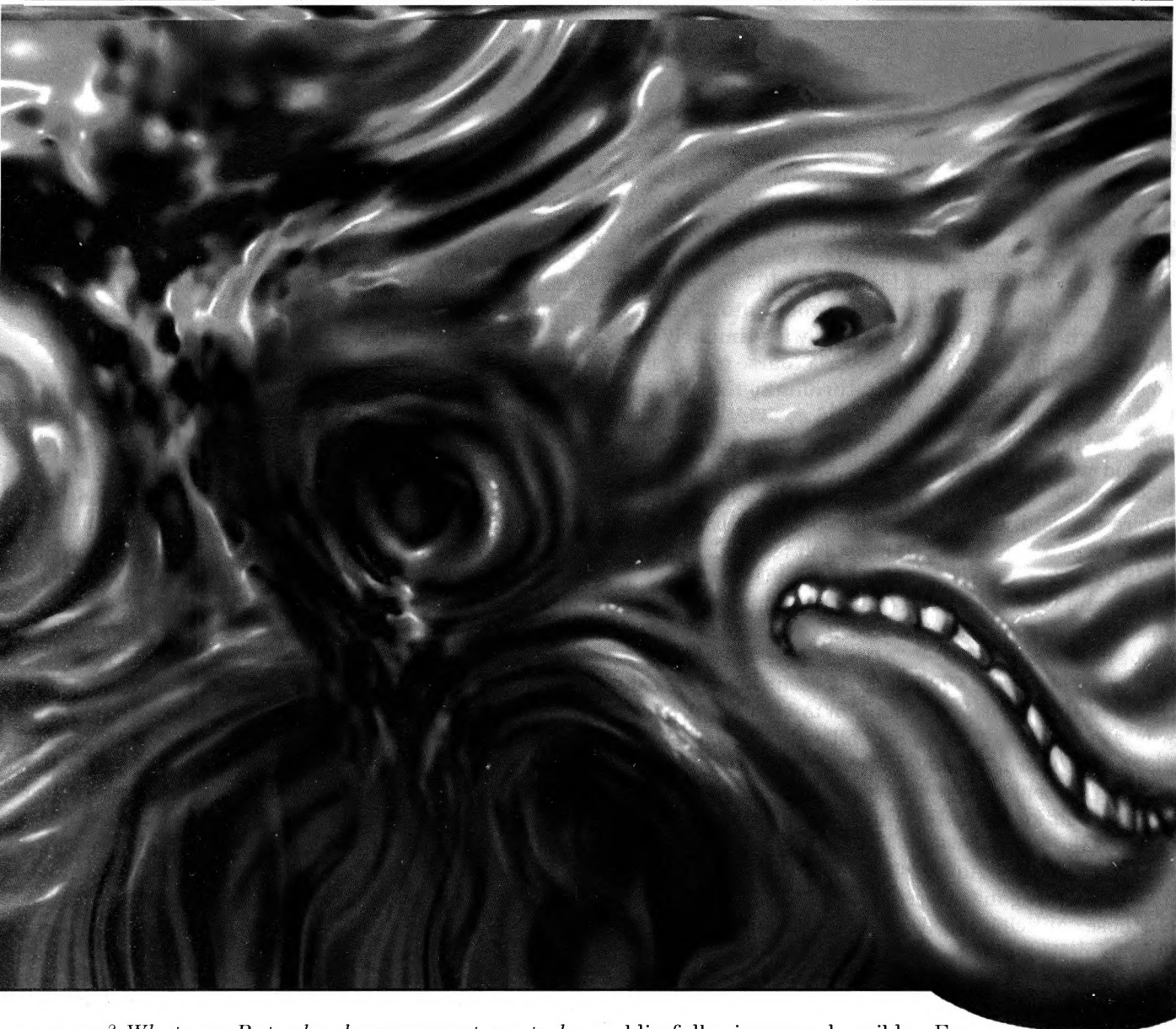
I was sandwiched between two groups of Arabs. At the front of the queue were a Filipino couple. There was not an Englishman in sight.

Arabs, Filipinos – they kept to themselves. But the English always seemed compelled to try to make conversation, especially when they found themselves seated next to a compatriot. And, despite the pigmentation of

my skin, which, even in the harshest light, retains its cinnamon hue, and despite the vestiges of epicanthic folds about my eyes, my accent and manner readily identified me as English. That is, one qualified to suffer a level of verbal intrusion heinous in the extreme.

"Why are you travelling to the Philippines? Where do you live? What do you do?" In my nervous attempts to meet the conversational imperative, I would, not out of design, but out of sheer inability to establish a rapport, disappoint expectations and confirm prejudices. I might almost have been speaking a foreign tongue. *"English?"* I would almost hear them think. *"This guy's neither English nor a man. Let's play a game with him. Let's play that old favourite: see what I can get away with."*

Inevitably, talk would become less a dialogue between equals and more interrogatory, the questions I would have to field in the end so impertinent that I would be forced to conclude that they could only be interpreted as signs of mental disorder, if not acute derangement. *"You do what? Really? Have you ever thought of doing anything different? And you live, where? Is that a place I'm supposed to have heard of? Why are you telling me all this? Because I asked you,*



Illustrations by Dominic Harman

you say? Whatever. But why do you expect me to be interested in your answers? Just exactly why should I treat you with respect?"

I again surveyed my fellow passengers. Not a single white face was in evidence.

I reminded myself that seats are not allocated sequentially, and that my tormentor had, perhaps, yet to arrive. But surely, I thought, surely this time I might get lucky. Surely this time I would be spared the psycho.

I asked for an aisle seat. I always did. I would not think of boarding if offered anything less. The aisle, that buffer zone patrolled only by air crew, drinks' trolleys and itinerant passengers seeking to relieve their bladders or stretch their legs, would at least spare me the unthinkable possibility of having to submit to being interrogated in stereo.

I boarded to discover that the morbid dread I had felt as soon as I had stepped into the taxi that had taken me to Heathrow – the dread that preoccupies me whenever I have to fly – had not, on this occasion, realized itself. While no one whom I had queued with occupied my row of seats, I found myself next to a Filipino. And across the aisle were three Arab men whose conversation was

blissfully incomprehensible. For the first leg of my journey I was, it seemed, safe.

We took off at just after nine p.m.

The forward camera relayed a dark, starry sky to the display sunk into the back of the seat in front of me. Once again, I was free. Free of England and its mad, mad hordes. My mind cleared, refreshed by a sense of deliverance.

I would, I promised myself, seek professional help. The same kind I had reluctantly sought in the past. My obsession with bad company at 39,000 feet had become grotesque. I had always had a neurosis about flying. I simply detested being confined in a long, metal tube with so many other sticky, fidgeting, anonymous bodies. But of late, this mild proclivity to claustrophobia was shading over into paranoia. It was ridiculous, of course, to confuse intrusiveness, or the babble of an aeroplane bore, with the threat posed by a genuine psychotic. A general distrust of humanity occasioned by a divorce, the forfeiture of my children and crippling maintenance payments had been exacerbated, during my brief return to London, by having had the ill-luck to have been the victim of two muggings within



the same number of months. The constant reports of “air rage” in the British newspapers did little to ameliorate my diseased state of mind. Doubtless, the only real psychotic I had encountered on these long, West-East, East-West flights had been myself.

But perhaps professional help would prove redundant. Perhaps, I thought, wistfully, with similarly fortuitous seating arrangements over a course of, say, five to six flights (I barely resisted turning to the Filipino and awarding him a smile), I would no longer feel such horror of my fellow man whenever entering an airport.

Food was served. After I had finished, I unpacked my headset, fiddled with the touch-sensitive screen before me, and watched *Shakespeare in Love*. By the time the film had ended, I almost felt relaxed. I pulled out my pocket edition of Swift, leafed through a few pages, and then, tiring more quickly than usual of the Dean’s acerbic insights, tucked it away amongst the flight magazines.

The lights were dimmed. I reclined my seat, removed the headset, placed it on my lap, leant backwards and closed my eyes. And all was done without so much as a murmur being exchanged between myself and the passenger next to me.

In the darkness, I thought of my farm in Bataan, and of Gloria, who would be meeting me tomorrow evening at Ninoy Aquino International Airport. She disliked waiting in the arrivals area amidst the crush of those anticipating the homecoming of maids, drivers, nurses, construction workers and other *balikbayans*. But my flight had taken off on time; she shouldn’t have to wait long. And then, after a four-to-five-hour drive, we would both be home.

I felt a hand on my knee.

I opened my eyes. Looked down. There it was, all right. A hand. On my knee.

I looked askance. The Filipino met my gaze, a finger held up to his lips in the universal sign for silence. The man’s eyes twinkled with good humour, enlivening an otherwise impassive face. I was reassured. The all-purpose, generic madman familiar to me from previous flights always seemed to possess eyes that glinted with qualities characteristic of an alpha-male puffed up with a vast and nauseating degree of self-satisfaction. I nodded, half rising, assuming that he simply wanted to get up and use the toilet. I felt his hand increase its pressure, and I was forced back into my seat. He leant towards me.

“I do believe,” he said, his mouth no more than six inches from my right ear, “that I may not be able to complete my journey.” He spoke a soft, lazy American-accented English with a fluency and timbre that would not have sounded out of place in an Ivy League graduate. His clothes, I noticed, though casual, were expen-

sive. Taken together, these things suggested that he was the scion of an old and rich family. The son, perhaps, of a *solon* or *taipan*. Living in the Philippines, as I did, I knew I would have to be careful what I said to him. His kind could make trouble for me on the ground. “I have tried to avoid this,” he continued. “I really have. It’s the *last* thing I want, I assure you. But, since you’re sitting next to me, it’s as well you be forewarned.”

Now that I had taken my first proper look at him I saw that he was in his late 20s or early 30s, about ten years younger than myself. Like me, he had *mestizo* blood. But whereas I could pass for a European – a Spaniard, perhaps, or a Cypriot – his own features were predominantly Asian.

This, I thought, is my reward for overconfidence. But I refused to relinquish hope. He might, after offering a simple explanation for his strange outburst, assume his former reticence, and I might be left in peace to shrink back into the covert of my inner self. But if he did not, I would, I knew, while not wishing to say or do anything to encourage his conversation, have to humour him. I could not afford to seem rude. I just prayed that he might not be as crazy as some of the Englishmen I had had to endure, the race of psychos of which he threatened to be an honorary member.

“I feel I should also issue some kind of warning to the lady on my right,” he said. “But she’s Chinese, and from her linguistic struggles with the flight crew, I would say that she understands very little English. I’d warn the whole plane, if I could. I would tell you all to stay in Dubai and not join the connecting flight to Hong Kong and Manila. I would tell you that if you did you would all die. But would anyone believe me?” He paused, as if expecting a reply. How anyone could have summoned up suitable words to calm, dismiss or confront him, was beyond my imagining.

I did not try. Instead, I gave a non-committal shrug. His eyes twinkled the more, the brown irises, at close quarters, revealing themselves to be splintered with amber. “No, of course not. No one would believe me. I’d be considered mad, which is perhaps how you, even now, choose to judge me. A psychotic, you think, yes? One of those people who behave so oddly once they get inside an airplane. My friend, I understand, I understand.”

Against my will, I spoke. “How –” But the rest of the sentence died at the back of my throat. His intuitive grasp of my state of mind had my thoughts racing so far ahead that language could not, for the moment, possibly catch them.

“There is something in you that –” He gave a little, almost imperceptible shake of his jowls. “Let’s just say that I do not believe you would betray me. It’s irrational of me, I guess. But you are a Filipino, are you not, *paré*? I believe you can be trusted to keep what I say to yourself. Perhaps listen to what I say with an



understanding, a sympathy, that I would not get from a foreigner? If you can't, then, well, I might be detained, I suppose. Perhaps even arrested. And though I'm beginning to fear that I'll not complete this flight, I must make the attempt. There is still a chance that I'll live long enough to find and kill my mother and father."

That's it, I thought. All hope gone. After all these years, I had found myself next to the crazy of crazies, no bore, no oaf, no barking drunk, no honorary member of the fabled race of madmen, but the aeroplane psycho *par excellence*. One who had an uncanny insight into my own anxieties, to boot. Perhaps the better to prey upon them.

Did I get some kind of prize?

I swallowed hard and then inclined my head. It was a gesture infused with enough ambiguity to imply that I had perhaps misunderstood him.

I glanced down. His hand was still on my knee. It glinted in the shadows and communicated a coldness through my trouser leg, as if it were made of steel, or ice.

"Very soon," he went on, a trace of a smile enlivening his face in the same way that the eyes had loaned it their own, temporary vitality, "very soon the replication will begin. And this time it will prove unstoppable. I meant to free myself. To go home and destroy the ones who've brought me to this pass. Who have made my life a hell. But over the course of the last few hours – just after dinner, in fact – I have felt the dog pack once again rise up within me. The evil spirits that have been with me since birth. They no longer call me master, those dogs. They're angry, I can tell. Angry that I no longer let them off the leash. Angry that I no longer set them loose upon the world. They mean to escape. To finish with me. To destroy me and move on."

The thin smile had been unwavering. It was also oddly infectious, and I found, to my annoyance, that I was smiling back. "I see," I said, my larynx a little revived as I fought to discipline my mouth and rid myself of my simpleton's grin, "yes, yes, I see."

"But perhaps I'm mistaken. Perhaps you're not travelling all the way. I'd pray to God it were so if I didn't know that God had stopped his ears to me."

"But I am," I said, "all the way to Manila." Ah. He had asked me my destination. The conversation was at last following a more traditional course. He would now, doubtless, tax me about how I made my living, and much else besides. At least I hoped he would. I had suddenly grown nostalgic for the common-or-garden intrusiveness I had suffered on so many other flights. Not so long ago, when questioned about how I made my living, I would have said I was in concrete. Concrete, its manufacture, sale and distribution is, I have found, an extremely potent conversation killer. I had deployed this falsehood with moderate success until I had had the embarrassing misfortune to be seated

next to someone for whom concrete had been his life's work and deepest love. And on a non-stop 16-hour trip to the Far East I had found myself struggling to meet his enthusiasm. Now I found it was easier and less painful to simply tell the truth.

"I have a farm," I said. "I'm not a landowner, of course." I gave a nervous laugh, the sort that on other occasions would give my interrogator the green light to start waxing abusive. "Foreigners can't own land in the Philippines. But I *rent* a piece of farmland. In Bataan. Near Mt Samat. It's an odd business for an outsider to be involved in, I admit, but –"

Before I could complete my somewhat self-apologetic explanation of how I carved out a precarious existence in his country, the Filipino resumed his monologue. I would normally have been grateful for such indifference. But not tonight. Tonight, the lack of curiosity awarded my private life served only to disturb me, like the discovery of a particularly unsettling and dissonant passage in a piece of piped music that I had hitherto regarded as utterly predictable.

It was at this moment that paranoia might have proved my salvation. If, upon hearing what he had next to say, I had got up, found a flight attendant, and reported that there was a potentially dangerous situation in the offing, I might have made it to Manila in one piece. Instead, I submitted, and let his words wash over me, even though I felt I was sure to drown. Fear had begun to work its paralytic magic.

"Unlike most people, I remember my birth. I remember it because it was unnatural. My mother, frustrated by her husband's impotence, had taken a lover and been careless enough to allow him to inseminate her. For as long as she could, she kept the shameful secret to herself. At last, her husband, discovering her infidelity along with her by now obvious perinatal condition, forced her to abort the child. The back-street quack who tore me from my mother's womb after a tenancy of just over seven months wrapped me in lint and old newspapers and took me beyond the city limits. And there he buried me in unhallowed ground. I remember because my spirit refused to leave its half-made body. I remember because my life had been preserved by the intervention of a multitude of *multó* and *mo-mo*: demonic spirits that became one with me in the limbo that my soul then inhabited. Not the *Limbus infantum*, but the limbo reserved for children who have been cursed and rejected by their parents: that other borderland of Hell that we seldom hear mentioned, the *Limbus satanum*. I remember. I remember it all. I remember because I am *impakto*."

Impakto. I had heard Gloria tell of the *impakto*. It was a folk legend. Its roots, I would guess, were animistic, but it had currency throughout the modern-day Philip-



piners, where Catholicism had accentuated the myth's resonance and potency. Popular Catholicism regarded abortion, not merely as immoral and irreligious, but as possessing occult dimensions.

He continued. No more than a heartbeat or two had interrupted his flow. "For 29 years I have been unable to excise that memory. No matter how far I've *run*, it follows, relentless. And believe me, my friend, I've run. Asia, the Middle East, Europe, Canada, the States." The smile widened, and I felt a vertigo, as if I were about to fall between his lips and into that blackness circumscribed by an ellipsis of bright enamel. "All my adult life has been spent in the States. I've done well there. I can't deny it. An *impakto* has certain advantages over other people. He's a warrior, and he cuts through the competition like chaff. But success has been commensurate with the growing sickness of my soul, a sickness that has made me less than human. The legions of the damned require some payment for their services. And of late, their demands have become quite extortionate. They've taken enough of me, I figure. They've been dining off me piecemeal for nearly as long as I can recall. No more. I intend to put up a fight." He paused, and the twinkle in his eyes became self-reflective. "I disappoint, you see," he continued, speaking more quietly now. "They think me ungrateful. Despite all they've done for me, I have refused to be a slave to their will. And now, with my determination to return to the Philippines and destroy those who made it possible for them to initially possess me, my determination to have, at last, my revenge, I have incurred, it seems, their unassuageable hatred."

"I see," I mumbled, once again stunned into banality, "I see, I see."

I wasn't allowed an opportunity to say anything more. The Filipino removed his hand from my thigh, averted his gaze and, with the same peremptoriness with which he had chosen to entrust me with his tale, reclined in his seat and almost immediately passed into a state that seemed like that of one who was so exhausted by worry as to be past caring. His eyelids clenched, and then, as he exhaled what seemed an inordinate amount of air, relaxed like unscrolled parchment weighted at the edges, with only little fits and quivers indicating the unruliness that lay beneath.

For me to likewise relax was, of course, out of the question. I lay back, every fibre of my body drenched with adrenaline.

Throughout much of the remaining flight to Dubai I would shoot the Filipino an occasional glance to try to establish whether his passivity was real and not feigned. If he did indeed sleep, then each modest grunt or cough he made seemed to threaten a return to consciousness, and kept me as much on my guard as if he were only resting his eyes. After a while, these hems and hacks

gave way to a stertorous drone. Whatever unspeakable dreams might be playing inside his head, I took comfort that he seemed unlikely to wake for some hours.

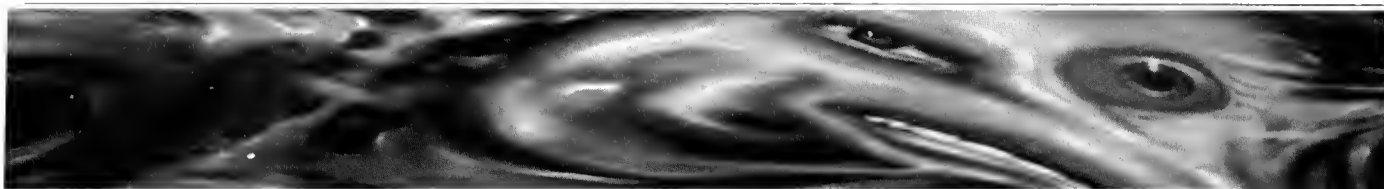
It was then that I became aware of the smell that had begun to emanate from his pores, as if his body, in deep sleep, had relaxed sufficiently for it to release a miasma until then contained by flesh, muscle, sinew and sheer will. Unlike the noises he made, it portended something more horrible than another round of speechifying; it suggested that I didn't know the half of it; that something was lurking just beyond my ken, something out of focus, but strangely familiar. My paranoia had, by now, been fully restored, and however much I might try to calm myself and mutter quiet exhortations to rationality, I was no longer in a mood to think of getting that "professional" help I'd earlier, in a moment of misplaced optimism, promised myself. No; I was now convinced of the old saw that paranoia is a pretty rational explanation of the world. Perhaps the only useful one there is.

Cautiously, I sniffed at the air, and then sniffed again. The smell wasn't exactly an offensive one, but neither was it pleasant. It reminded me of damp vegetation and rotten fruit. On another, more auspicious occasion, it might have summoned up pleasant memories of trekking through rain forest, instead of calling to mind a Manila land fill and the attendant scent of feculence, poverty and life's slow, painful decay.

Hours passed. I kept my vigil. The smell grew stronger, and I marvelled that no one else seemed to have noticed it. A localized epidemic of congested sinuses? Or perhaps Arab mores discouraged the acknowledgement, blatant, subtle or otherwise, of offensive body odours? As my nostrils prickled in rancour at the smell's increased pungency, the air about me would sometimes appear to shiver. Turbulence could not account for the phenomenon; the flight was smooth. Besides which, it was not only the air that was affected; the faces of the passengers in the rows in front and behind shivered too. They seemed to have had something superimposed upon them: other faces, ghostly, indefinable. After a rapid blinking of my eyes, the illusion would disappear.

When the pilot announced that we were about to make our descent, the Arab occupying the window seat to my left raised the shutter, and dawn light flooded my section of the cabin. Dazed, with one hand held up to shield my eyes from the sun, I looked about me. The Filipino sat as he had throughout the latter half of the flight, though his head now lolled in my direction. White crescents showed beneath his eyelids, and though I could not lip read, I could swear his tremulous mouth formed the words "*Losing control, losing control...*"

We made a routine landing. Though it is common for the majority of passengers to vacate their seats before the seat-belt sign has been turned off, I was up and reaching



for my hand luggage even before the aircraft had put its engines into reverse. Despite the calls and angry stares of the cabin crew, I remained standing until we had taxied to the spot where we were scheduled to disembark.

As soon as the doors had opened, I shouldered my way out and hurried down the steps and onto the tarmac. The airport bus's doors opened; the rush of compressed air was echoed by my own heavy sighs of relief. I stepped inside the bus; slung my bag on the floor and grabbed a strap. My lungs rid themselves of the last of the aircraft's particulates. And for the first time in many hours I felt that I could breathe again.

In transit, I sat watching CNN on one of the monitors that were dotted about the lounge. I fingered my new boarding pass. The likelihood that I would again be seated next to the crazy Filipino was, I knew, minimal; but my anxiety would not be allayed, and every so often I would scan the lounge to see if I could spot him amongst the crowd. Whenever somebody who approximated his appearance walked by I would immediately avert my gaze and resume watching television, terrified in case I met his eye and elicited a smile and more of his unwelcome company. But unable to resist, like a child seated before a button that says *Don't touch*, my head would turn and my gaze wander, until a similar apparition would induce another whiplash effect and I would find myself ruefully massaging the cords in my neck and staring into the bespectacled eyes of Larry King, or the scene of some colourful natural disaster in Turkey, Bangladesh or Peru.

I had, it seemed, attained a new level of paranoia, and, like someone playing a computer game, held my breath in expectation of finding some hidden level, access to which would give me mastery of the situation, or at least, provide a way out. *Paranoia*; yes, that was the name of the game. The name of the world. The sum of all things.

If only I could find the exit.

I took deep, measured breaths. And then I tried to calm myself, adjusting my breathing patterns in the way the doctors had ordered.

So much, of late, had aggravated my fears. Perhaps the return to Asia had been a mistake. No one in the Philippines thought of me as a Filipino. Whenever I refused to loan money or held that I was anything more than a rich, stupid foreigner with fewer rights than a stray dog, I would incur the displeasure of the locals. I was the subject of gossip, suspicion, perhaps even hatred. Those that pretended to be my friends had often revealed themselves to be enemies. All in all, my country of origin had not been a particularly healthy place for an emergent paranoiac like myself to take up residence.

I had been born in the Philippines. But could I really

call myself a Filipino?

The English couple who became my parents had adopted me while working for the British Council in Manila. Why, I had often wondered, had they chosen me? Perhaps I had simply been the whitest baby in the orphanage. The identity of my real parents remained a mystery. It had been my biological mother whom I had presumed to be a Filipino, my father, perhaps, an American serviceman or tourist. But who knows? Perhaps I was a mix of American and Chinese blood, or an exotic, hereditary throwback whose lineage might be traced to the bastard son of a newly-arrived 17th-century Spanish governor and his mulatto mistress from Guadaloupe. The possibilities were, as they say, endless.

The private detective I had engaged when I had first arrived in the Philippines had been unable to help. All that was certain was that I had left the Philippines when I was two years old, and had returned to find myself treated as an outsider.

As I looked about me, my apprehensive scanning of the transit lounge turning up nothing but the tired, unknown faces of those about to again commit themselves to the mercies of the air, I wondered at the fact that I was going back to a place I knew I could never make my home.

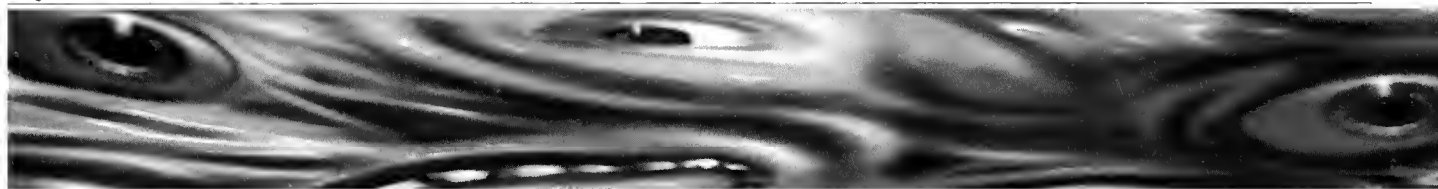
And yet, despite the occasional attack of hyperventilation, the pressure on my temples and the buzzing inside my head, I detected, deep within myself, something calm, something that resembled the eye of an emotional storm: a memory, a memory of how things really were, or might be. The memory was confused; buried; it would not surface and resolve itself. But I clove to it, telling myself, in an effort to add a counterweight to my dread, that all that was happening was preordained, that something was about to manifest itself that would make all the fears that had of late haunted me disappear. Something in itself fearful, but right. Something I had been seeking for many years and that promised to offer me a new life.

I never did see the man who claimed to be *impakto* until I was aboard the 777 that would take me to Hong Kong and then Manila.

This time, he was seated four rows in front of me. Like me, he had an aisle seat, and I found that, all through take-off, I could not keep my eyes off the back of his head. I hardly thought about the passenger on my left, or the possibility that he might disclose himself to be as boorish, or perhaps even insane, as those that had gone before.

My sickness was, I suppose, partly cured, for my paranoid fantasies were now focused on the one I could still hardly believe I had escaped, and on him alone.

Once we were airborne, with the desert falling away to be replaced by the aquamarine expanse of the Gulf, I



tried to put my erstwhile tormentor out of mind. Within seven to eight hours I would be in Hong Kong. The stop would be a brief one, and, after the plane had taken on new passengers, I would at last be bound for Manila.

The cabin was uncomfortably cold. When boarding, the heat that had ricocheted up from the runway at Dubai had been ferocious. Whoever was responsible for adjusting the cabin temperature had clearly overcompensated. So cold was it that condensation had formed. The ceiling glistened with a wet, glossy patina. After a while, the water droplets hung in the air, swirling about the overhead luggage compartments. The mist, as sticky and tart as an aerosol gas, and infused with a faint, somewhat reminiscent scent, was particularly thick in the vicinity of the *impakto*. The cabin crew seemed unconcerned. So did the majority of the passengers. I put the matter out of mind.

I wrapped a blanket about my shoulders. Comforted, like a child beneath an eiderdown listening to the wind and rain outside, I drifted into unconsciousness. The ease with which sleep came seemed to suggest that I had begun to get into the dull, soporific rhythm of my journey.

When I awoke I consumed, like the good, well-drilled passenger I had become, more aeroplane food than was good for me. The very sight and smell of those universally despised little silver containers of steamed mush had, on more than a few previous occasions, been enough to precipitate an attack of hives. But I felt uncommonly robust. When I had finished, I watched *Ronin*, and then reclined my seat. The food soon had its revenge on my presumption. Though the reaction was, this time, purely psychosomatic, my sleep was fitful, disturbed by the need to scratch at the phantom bumps that polka-dotted my arms.

The flight to Hong Kong was without further event.

We landed. A handful of cleaners swept away the accumulated debris. Passengers disembarked, others boarded. And then we were again in the air, on a trajectory that would deliver me to the country of my birth.

Compared to the long-haul between London and Hong Kong, the flight to Manila was no more than a hop. I thought to kill what time remained with my Swift. Patting my pockets, I suddenly recalled that I had left it aboard the other aircraft. It had been a present from my ex-wife. No matter, I thought. Perhaps it were better forgotten.

After an hour, or perhaps hour-and-a-half, I found myself casting a wary glance or two at the *impakto*. But the knowledge that my journey was drawing to an end reassured me that, no matter what might transpire I would soon be on the ground, through passport control, customs and free.

Like the flight to Hong Kong, the last leg was so uneventful as to have me suppose that freedom was mine for the taking.

I looked at my watch. In just over 15 minutes I would be landing in Manila. My complacency translated itself into an immoderate curiosity about the man seated next to me. I wondered that I had not been mindful of him before, being only conscious of a vague, blurred Asian presence – Filipino, Chinese, Thai, Malay – that occupied my left field of vision, a man, I seemed to remember, who had struggled to eat his meal with a measure of decorum while flicking through the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. I turned to face him, a smile, such as I had almost bestowed on the mad Filipino, about to bloom on my lips, so much had complacency displaced my angst and spirited away my instinct for self-preservation.

I felt blood rush to my head. Meeting my gaze with twinkling eyes was the otherwise impassive and wretchedly familiar face of the *impakto*. He smiled. Immediately, as if he had tweaked a couple of strings, I found myself smiling. He had performed this trick with me before, of course. This time, I did not have the mental or emotional reserves to feel annoyance, or even to repress that copycat response. Astonishment had drained me as effectively of fear and anger as it had of the simplest mechanical skills.

I unfroze. Snapping about, I looked down the aisle. There, where he had always been, was the Filipino who had sat next to me during the flight from London to Dubai. Though he still presented me with his back, he was instantly recognizable. So, unfortunately, were the other passengers in his vicinity. All those who, like me, occupied seats bordering the starboard aisle, had their faces turned in my direction, and each one, like the man to my left, wore the face of the *impakto*.

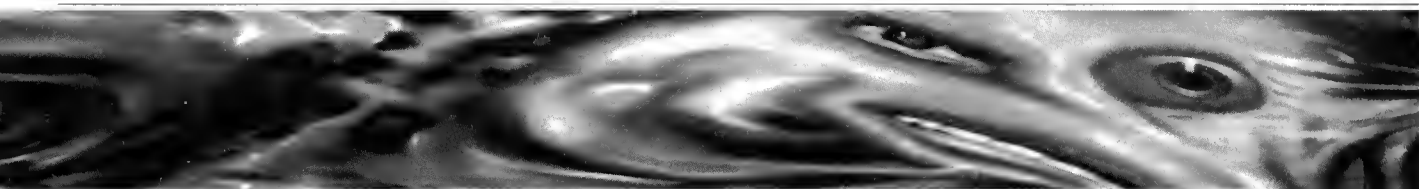
Nerves which had frayed, and been subsequently patched up, now short-circuited. The repair work had, of course, been of a temporary nature. You might even say the work had been botched. There was little I could do now except curse myself for incompetence and accept, as I had long had cause to, that either the world was mad, or I was.

With a convulsive twitch of my neck, I again stared into the eyes of the man next to me. They continued to sparkle with a private and, it now seemed, quite abominable humour.

"I take it he has told you the bad news?" he said, with the same New England tones that I remembered from several hours ago. "That he will not be able to complete this flight?" I nodded, too nonplussed to respond in any other way. "It's quite true. This plane will never reach Manila. We simply can't allow it. He means to exorcise us, you see. By tracking down and killing the ones who perpetrated the so-called 'crime against his soul'."

"His parents," I whispered, somewhat surprised by my audaciousness.

"His parents," the man agreed. "His true parents." He



leant forward and placed a hand on my thigh. "I believe he tried to warn you. You should have listened. Found a hotel in Dubai. There's no escape now, I'm afraid."

It was a sense of disgust, I think, a revulsion at his proximity, that steeled me into brushing his hand away with as much force as I could muster. I eased myself from my seat and stood in the aisle, looking up and down the cabin for a steward or stewardess. Someone, anyone, in whom I could confide my predicament and what seemed to be a threat to the safety of the plane. I believe the thought that I might be mad had, by now, ceased to occur to me, just as the question of whether the world had started to defy the fundamental laws of physics had ceased to have any relevance. All that had transpired since leaving London had had its own dream-like logic. I felt compelled to act upon it.

Now that I stood I saw the face of the *impakto* everywhere. He sat in aisle seats, in window seats, by exit doors and galleys. His visage seemed to have contaminated the entire plane. When I at last caught the eye of one of the cabin crew, I saw that the young woman who returned my gaze had not escaped. Her face, like that of the other females aboard, was a feminized but unmistakable copy of the *impakto*'s. The transformation – all the more disconcerting because her name tag identified her as the one who had served me drinks – was so consistent with the logic of what had gone before that it was unable to distract me. I bore down on her, no longer wishing to confide, or even to request help, but ready to demand some answers.

"Sir," she said, before I could speak, "the seat-belt sign is on. Would you please remain seated?"

"But look around you," I said, "can't you see what's –" But I knew it was useless to protest, for her eyes twinkled with the same diabolical joke that I now knew the whole plane shared. Wherever my panicked gaze roamed, it found only copies of the *impakto*, men, women and even children who all had the same face, and all of whom were smiling.

"Please sir," she said, with an air of frank admonishment, "we will shortly be landing."

A hundred pairs of eyes were trained upon me, all urging me to do her bidding.

I pushed past her and stumbled towards the Filipino who I knew must be responsible for this rash of clones that seemed of one mind and one insidious purpose. So many identical faces surrounded me that, for a moment, I could not locate him. But however much the faces of the other passengers seemed to have been pressed from the one die, their clothes were immutable. The expensive threads worn by the *impakto* gave him away.

I bent over him, resisting the impulse to immediately draw back. He gave off a pungent odour far stronger than that which I had sampled previously. It was a

smell redolent of the mist that still swirled about the cabin. It was the fixing agent, the permanent, animal scent – a stink of rotting meat – that infused the mist's evanescence. His complexion was as loathsome as the smell. Far from evincing the health and vigour of the well-groomed man that I remembered him to be, it had become livid, the skin a moonscape of open sores. From the sores wisps of vapour rose. Here, it seemed, was the source of the mist. The moonscape had its own little volcanoes. And I knew – knew instinctively – that the algid miasma they exuded contained a million million spores.

The mist was no by-product of the aircraft's air-conditioning; it was the contagion of a dying man. By now, it had extended to all parts of the cabin. It coruscated like spun sugar filled with countless tiny steel flies. And it had, it seemed, unaccountably infected everybody except me.

The *impakto* was awake. It was almost as if I had been expected. He reached out, his fingers closing upon the nylon lapel of my blouson.

"I couldn't hold on," he whispered, his breath like carrion, "I couldn't keep them from getting out. The nest of my others. The demons who've infested me ever since I was torn from my mother's womb. They're seeping through my pores like maggots. Like worms. They're taking to the air. They're infecting the plane." His eyes opened so wide that the orbits seemed to occupy nearly half of his face, as if he were a character from a Japanese animation. "They can't stay in their new bodies long. Only I can provide them with a permanent habitation. But they can stay in them long enough to ensure my downfall. They won't be placated, oh no, not this time they won't. Not this time! They've come to finish me. To finish us all."

He raised his other hand and placed it on his forehead. "Each time I release seed," he continued, "each time my soul exhales and confers replication, my body is damaged. Sometimes, the damage is quite severe." He bowed his head. "The spirits have fled me, and they will not return. I'm like a deserted house. Dilapidated. Hollow. Dangerous. Due for imminent demolition. I'll never see Carmela again."

He stared up at me. "Has the entire aircraft been seeded? I suspect it has. But why have they spared you, my friend. Why, why?"

I straightened. Why indeed, I thought. The logic that governed the nightmarish drama unfolding about me was flawed. Why didn't it collapse like any other piece of ill-constructed theatre?

And why didn't I wake up? I shut my eyes and willed that it be so.

A moment later, I felt myself grabbed. I opened my eyes and swung about. The stewardess had taken hold of my arm, and a male steward was striding up the



cabin to lend her his assistance.

I made a last, desperate appeal to rationality: the stewardess's androgynous features, which cast her in the role of the *impakto's* identical twin, might conceivably, I decided, have something to do with special effects. I knew that I was hoping against hope, that I clutched at straws in the same way as I had done when checking-in at Heathrow; but if this was no dream, it seemed pertinent to take the time to at least briefly consider all the things that may be achieved with make-up, latex and mirrors. The sight of the steward, as he closed in, put paid to these considerations. Like the male passengers, he was the *impakto*; more than a clone, he was the essence of the man. It was as if the Filipino who was his original were a mere shell, a discarded husk. This was no illusion; no one wore masks, neither was I the victim of stage trickery. This was real.

The steward put me into an arm lock with fluid expertise and marched me back the way I had come. I decided to put up no resistance, and allowed him to manhandle me into my seat. I had little fight in me at the best of times, and the last five minutes had been so numbing that even token resistance would have proved impossible. I slumped down like one who has been summarily filleted.

"Why have you been spared?" said the one next to me, echoing the words of the *impakto*. "Perhaps because we have something in store for you. And you for us. But that is something we can talk about later. The replication is, I believe, complete. We now find ourselves in the endgame." He looked up at the steward and raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"Yes, it's complete," said the steward, with a wink. "The pilot and co-pilot have joined the party. They're both orchestrated. We are all, it seems, playing the same tune. We should be –" I lurched forward. Some of the overhead compartments opened and luggage fell down into the aisle. "Whoops, seems that we're ahead of schedule."

A drinks trolley rolled down the aisle and sent the steward scurrying away.

The plane was going into a dive.

"We're some 200 miles from Manila," said the man to my left. "A crash-landing in the Central Cordillera will make survival virtually impossible. Even for an *impakto*. I think you already understand that he is not like other men. He may suffer injuries an ordinary man would find mortal. And live. He may shrug off the most terrible wounds. But now we are out of his body, and he is weakened, even he will not be able to withstand the impact when this plane comes down in the mountains." Once more, he turned his smile upon me. "Neither, alas, will anybody else."

A face appeared over the headrest of the seat in front of me. A young girl's face. Not a face that you would

normally ascribe to a child, of course. It was the face of a man, shrunk, infantilized, epicene: the only face, apart from my own, that had any currency on this plane. The *impakto* face. "But don't worry," said the girl. "We've made provision for you."

"Of course," said the man next to me. "It has all been quite fortuitous."

"Incredibly so," said a woman across the aisle. "If one were to believe that there was such a thing called luck, and that it superseded destiny."

The engines began to scream. Cloud was coming off the wings like spindrift. Our descent became steeper, the scream a roar. The spindrift was replaced by thick, violent surf. I gritted my teeth in anticipation of the big wipeout.

The airframe moaned and creaked. Luggage, blankets, headphones and plastic tumblers flew through the air.

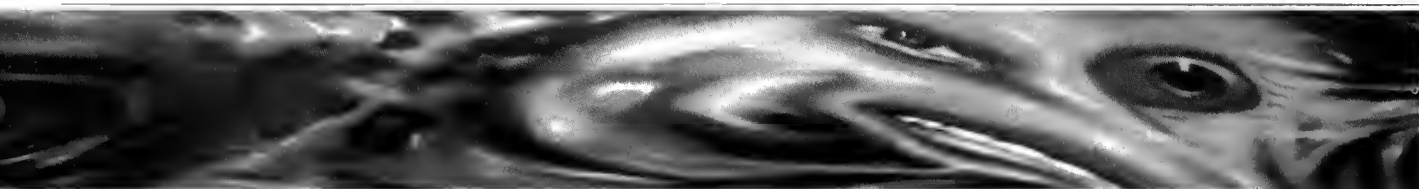
Both the girl and the woman across the aisle seemed to be melting.

I shouted something to the man on my left. I don't know what. He was melting too. His face, no longer that of the *impakto*, resembled plastic that had been put under a blowtorch. Where his hands had been gripping his knees was a thick, pink, amorphous goo oozing from the cuffs of his shirt. I flinched; tried to stand. But I could not move. Looking down, I discovered that the same gelatinous muck covered the floor, and that I could not extricate my feet. In a few seconds the stuff had risen to my calves.

I looked up. The child had not moved. But she had become unrecognizable, either as an infantile abstract of the *impakto*, or as a human being. Her face had started to drip, like melted fat, onto my lap; fat that, far from scalding me, was cold as ice, and sent little shivers of disgust across my skin. Before long, her features had almost completely dissolved. And then she spoke. If I had not been so preoccupied by having had the transmuted substance of her face dumped into the pit of my thighs, the question of how she might still be capable of utterance would, I think, have perplexed me.

"Neat trick, eh? It's just one of many ways to kill a human when you enter their body. You induce mitosis, then just line up their molecules so, so, and so – really, it's that simple. The process has pharmaceutical applications, of course. We were thinking of selling the secret to Johnson and Johnson. It would have made our host even more rich. But he screwed up. Now we're going to have to screw *him*." And then all I heard was a glug-glug-glug as the flap of blubber that had substituted for a mouth, along with what else remained of her face, spilled onto the floor.

The row of three seats across the aisle was also – and I was quickly feeling somewhat jaded by these discoveries – no longer boasting its complement of human flesh. Replacing the passengers were three vaguely



anthropomorphic shapes. They reminded me of enormous jelly babies. The cloud cover was now a sheet of white, razor-edged steel that seemed ready to divest the airframe of its wings. The jelly babies wobbled as the airframe strained to maintain integrity, and then slopped onto the floor.

They oozed across the aisle, their will informed by the same intelligence as had recently manifested itself in the man and child.

They joined with the once-human stuff that undulated about my calves. The cocktail had now become sufficiently plenteous for it to begin what seemed its ultimate objective.

It began to enfold me.

I struggled. But the gel secured me to my seat as if it were superglue. I surrendered to fatalism.

As the gel rose, rippling up my chest, keeping my arms pinioned to my sides, and then rose higher until it passed my neck and chin, I took in what I was sure would be my last sight of the world.

The mist had descended and was thick about me. I felt like a tourist who has attempted to scale a mountain without taking the necessary precautions, or like a homely teenager who has gone to a party, only to discover, on the way home, that a homicidal lunatic has escaped from the local asylum, and lurks in the fog. *I knew I shouldn't have come*, I kept thinking, that phrase so insistent that it drummed all terror from my mind.

The mist grew so thick I began to choke, as if on a cloud of midges. *I knew I shouldn't have come*, echoed the midges, a note of sarcasm evident in each pipsqueak enunciation that raised itself above the chaos of the general chorale. Midges? Spores? Robotic flies? They were so close I could almost distinguish the individual expressions of their tiny, somewhat bat-like faces. Mocking, full of spite, yet at the same time sentimental, twinkling with what was doubtless a predisposition to find amusement in life's little contretemps, they represented a whole, miniature universe of corrupted sensibility.

And then I saw no more, or rather, saw only a blurred outline of what I

had formerly, as if my eyes had been smeared with a thick coating of Vaseline. The gel had wrapped itself about the crown of my head, sealing me within its viscid compass.

Acquiescence at last gave way to panic, and, if only I had been able, I would have begun to flail, bite and holler. But it was too late. I was in the belly of something that resembled a monstrous jellyfish. I had, I suppose, to an outside observer, become that belly, the heart, lungs and digestive organs of something that was really less coelenterate than gigantic protozoan. I was trapped, immobile, helpless as a latter-day Jonah whose deity had despised him so thoroughly as to consign him to a creature not even of his own creation.

I found I could breathe, but only just. The substance that encased me was insufficiently porous to prevent a slow, but relentless depletion of oxygen. Inside my head the scream of the engines had translated itself into a high-pitched whine, the kind of internal sound effect that usually serves as a premonition of a swoon.

I was going to die. I hadn't been spared after all. The logic of the nightmare was sound. There was no escape. Yes, yes. I was going to die, just like the rest of the passengers.

The impact was a dream impact. Appropriate for a dream aircraft, a dream sky, a dream manifest. It was an impact that belonged to a disaster movie dreamt up by a megalomaniac, one in which extras, such as myself, had been denied a look at the script. Not that it would have meant much, that script. It had been written in a dream language, a meaningless scrawl that had yet been able to communicate – if only I'd had the common sense to recognize it – a curious foreboding. For all my life I had, I knew now, been fated to play this part. One in which the nameless extra is suddenly, unaccountably thrust centre stage. A dream part, but one which I would rather have passed on, slinking back to the shadows of anonymity, where, surely, I belonged.

A ball of flame; and then a tremendous concussion. My head snapped to and fro, buffeted inside its jellied caul. Ruptured from its restraining bolts, my seat came loose. I shot upwards. The roof of the cabin had begun to open up; above me was a hole fringed with serrated metal. I passed through. A canopy of orange filled the sky.

The thick, semi-fluid but sturdily-built amnion held. Though my sight was blurred, I glimpsed





other bodies fly past: broken, doll-like forms that shot through space like shooting stars.

The orange canopy disappeared. I soared into blackness. *I'm in the open*, I thought. *Clear of the plane*. The shooting, combusted forms of human bodies gave way to stars less brilliant, a space less cruel. For a moment, I seemed to hang, motionless. All about me was the expanse of the night. And then I fell.

A boom; and the firework display that I had recently navigated was resurrected, the pyrotechnicians putting out everything for the grand finale. The orange flames ballooned upwards. I plummeted through airbursts of Roman candles, Catherine-wheels of white-hot steel, sparklers, bangers and all manner of illuminations improvised from the remains of the doomed 777 and its fuel.

The dazzlement ceased. I hit the ground, other stars and rockets momentarily dancing before my eyes at this second impact. I felt my sac of cold, cold gel roll across a bumpy surface and come to rest. But I remember nothing more. Not of my return to consciousness, or of how I came to be free of the stuff that had protected me from the crash. I do not even remember, in those dazed moments, that lasted minutes, perhaps hours, whether I came to ask myself why I had been spared. I wandered, I know that; and perhaps, concussed, hardly knowing where or who I was, I wandered for much of the night. When I eventually came to myself, I regretted that my spell of amnesia had not been more prolonged.

I awoke close to dawn. The wreckage was no longer burning, and the sky, though dark and still filled with smoke, was tinted with the purple glow of sunrise.

People had arrived. Rescuers, I thought at once. But as I turned my head and surveyed the crowd through soot-caked eyelashes, I saw that they were Ifugao. Tribespeople who lived in these hills.

We were, then, in the Central Cordillera, the mountains where I had been told we would come down. The Ifugao were scurrying amongst the dead, looting whatever valuables they could get their hands on before anybody connected to the authorities arrived. An old woman strode up to me, knelt down and unfastened my watch. She put it to her ear, shook it, and then, with a frown, tucked it away in the folds of her blouse. She recommenced her labours, focusing, this time, on my signet ring. As she tried to pry the ring from my finger she seemed to realize that I was staring up at her, and that my eyes were not those of a corpse. She jumped back and cried out to her companions.

A contingent of looters surrounded me, looking down and conferring over what they should do with this man who had lacked the decency to die along with all the other passengers and crew.

One of them sneezed. And then another. Their feet

were shrouded in mist; from it, swirls of cold, dry vapour rose and circulated about their shoulders and heads.

My skin had begun to emit a pungent, almost overpowering odour. To glow.

Another one of their number sneezed. The Ifugao were prodding me. And then, with a gentleness that belied their previous disposition, they hoisted me up and began to carry me down the mountainside through undergrowth that reeked of aeroplane fuel and dead bodies. From their hands gold chains dangled, watches, broken video cameras.

Why did I always get the psycho? Or rather, why had my crippling self-consciousness inspired others to treat me, if not as a psycho, then as someone as much resembling one of the helpless, despised denizens of the universal Bedlam as made no difference? Because there had been something in my soul that had not been assimilable, that's why. On a rational level, I would never argue that such a blatant defiance of nature over nurture might be possible. But the sense of alienation that had plagued me ever since I was a teenager when I had learnt of my true origins as an abandoned, adopted child, would have nothing to do with rationality. And whoever might be seated next to me on my numerous long-haul trips would soon come to perceive, in the excuses and evasions, the stutters and blushes, my compromised sense of self-worth, and see fit to exploit it. But they would never have sensed just how alien the kernel of my being actually was.

I felt calm. There had indeed been a still centre to the turmoil of my existence. The eye of the hurricane had revealed itself.

The new life, like my new flesh, had been born from the ashes of misanthropy. But I no longer hated; and I no longer feared. For I no longer had anything to do with humankind. Soon, I would walk amongst the spirits. No longer the victim. No longer the nervous fool who incessantly worried what others thought of him. No longer someone fit only to be bullied, who quakes every time he sits next to a stranger. No longer the man who has no roots. Walk amongst spirits? I was filled with spirits. I had become a spirit myself.

What else had my life been for?

I was not the man who always got the psycho.

Nor was I myself psychotic.

I was *impakto*.

Richard Calder, who is from Essex but currently lives in the Philippines, published his first stories with *Interzone* exactly a decade ago, in 1989. His latest novel is *The Twist* (October 1999), and his most recent piece here was "Malignos" (issue 144) – which will form the basis of a novel of the same title, forthcoming from Simon & Schuster/Earthlight in May 2000. The above new story is unrelated to the last.

The Descent

Ian Watson

Earls Heath is a typical English market town of some 20,000 souls. A tributary of the Ouse flows through former water meadows, now a large industrial estate. Each year new houses eat up fields, but to the east a heathland rises gently, the town's "Common," protected from development at least for the present. It's to the Common, away from the immediate glow of street lamps and buildings, that hundreds of us – might we number a thousand? – have come on this crisp chilly Thursday night to view the comet: fuzzy white head and huge bright feather in the eastern sky, such a splendid spectacle. For the past half-week the sky was overcast, denying any view and building up expectation. Tonight is completely clear and the moon is only a sickle. Along the road at the edge of the heath masses of cars are parked on both sides. Frost sparkles, starlight fallen to earth amongst the gorse. Many of us thought to bring pocket torches to cope with tussocks and rabbit holes. Myself, I forgot, so I'm one of the blunderers.

Annabelle would have remembered a torch – she was quite practical. By the same token I don't suppose she would have come out here tonight in the cold, and anyhow she left me two months ago – off to California and exciting prospects with Marcus, whom I never suspected until the last moment. (*This isn't working out, Nick. You're too reined in. Oh you're clever. You can be witty but I never know what feelings there are under it all or if there are any real feelings. Marcus is – I don't want to tell you and I don't need to. I hope you have a happy life.*) Marcus and Annabelle and I had all worked at Talkcom, him as chief phone designer, Annabelle as personal assistant to the boss, and me (with my second class PPP degree) in public relations. PPP is politics, philosophy, and psychology. As I put it at the interview, how to understand and massage people's needs in a world packed with competing suppliers. Tech-tools as personal enhancement and adornment. Self-image, mental underpinnings. Well, you have to sell yourself.

Kids are having a whale of a time tonight. Spot of anarchy, this, so many people spilling out from our usually sedate little town into the open. "Look, look, you'll always remember –"

Mazzini-Florescu, so we're told, isn't a comet belonging to our solar system. It came in from the deeps. It will whip around the sun and head off, never to be

seen again. Mazzini is some amateur astronomer in Italy; Florescu is a Romanian; both reported the first sighting at the same time.

Maybe I should have gone to a pub instead for the illusion of company?

Shared purpose, here on the Common, but I'm lonely in this diffuse crowd. Perhaps I ought to leave Earls Heath, though here's where work is. A publicity chap is less in demand than a designer.

No: I came for the comet, to take me out of myself and to set my loss of Annabelle in perspective. Thousands of stars above me; thousands of other women I might meet, if not perhaps in Earls Heath. I've been numb and I came for a dose of wonder, of intensified feeling. How many other people did so too, unconsciously? Nowadays we're all a bit numb. Wars on TV are less real because they're interchangeable with soap operas. Life is less real than movies, and maybe we confuse the two. History and politics seem to have vanished into remixes and repeats. Everybody can talk to everybody else and no one has anything new to say. The democratization of information is the victory of banality. Hiya Karen, it's Sharon, I'm here on the Common seeing the comet. You here too? You hear me okay? I thought we got cut off. Hey, if you see Darren, say hiya.

It happens so suddenly: a glory of light spreading swiftly across the night sky like oily paint, blue and pink and orange. Soon it's spilling down upon the ground, attaching to trees phosphorescently, flowing swiftly across heath and streets and houses, and clinging to people too. In the direction of the city the horizon has lit up as if a bombardment by napalm is in progress. Light crawls everywhere, an inverted aurora which especially garbs people, like St Elmo's Fire or Pentecostal flames seeking and attaching.

I know that I'm not who I was such a short while ago. I'm another, with the same body and much of the same self as before. Some of my memories may have failed. I may be seeking a memory of Annabelle that no longer exists, the opposite of *déjà vu* – *déjà inconnu*.

No, memories are still here, but they're distanced as if the remembered events happened to another person. Not exactly *my* memories, yet nevertheless available to

me. I have become somebody else who happens to be much the same person. No, that's not quite right. I now is a *new* self. The previous self has gone. Yet I have inherited who he was, as the basis for... what exactly? For who I am now.

Mild panic breaks out across the Common, so I know that it isn't only myself who feels radically strange. Not a screaming-panic but a bumping-into panic. A panic bred of unfamiliarity, a seeking – partly in vain – for familiarity. Instincts have taken over. Reach out to family or friends – but who are they now? What have they become?

"Ben, is that you? Are you sure? It's me, Julie – of course it's me. Just, I don't feel like me –"

This is like a parody of fatuous mobile phone calls. Only, now people's voices themselves are the phones.

"Merrick! Are you there? Hold my hand –!"

The glory of light has almost gone. Trickles run here and there, fading out, like rain draining away after a downpour. The panic becomes a need to reach cars. A hermit crab out of its shell must feel this way. I'm trotting towards mine. People scramble into their vehicles on both sides of the road. Is everyone present? Have we forgotten someone? Have we, perhaps, forgotten our own selves?

My old VW Golf feels familiar yet strange, as if I have climbed into it after years of absence. Engines start up. Cars edge out and move off. So do I. Not smoothly – jerkily: lurch and brake. Quite a few knocks. Tail-lights shatter. Wings scrape, bumpers collide. Yet no one jumps out to protest or accuse or examine damage. None of the vehicles is valued in the same way as they were an hour ago. The imperative to go home is too great. This a very slow stampede, such is the confusion on the road, so poor is the driving. Faces peer blankly out of windows into the night. We're refugees – fleeing from what? Whatever it is, we have brought it along with us.

Presently several drivers, myself included, pull out of the slow chaos into the big car park of the Harvester pub-restaurant, lit up with carriage lamps and neon. We park higgledy-piggledy. We climb out. Customers have spilled out of the pub.

A voice calls, "Who's that –?"

"Who –?" echoes another.

We're encountering – with some surprise – ourselves and attempting to identify who and what we are, which is... not exactly human, not any longer. Somehow we have stopped being human, yet we still remain men and women and children. I'm not scared, because I am who I ought to be, but this is different from what I was, even if it imitates what I was. From the car park the comet is still visible, though more vaguely.

Something descended, like angels entering us or like code downloading from the sky. During the time of the descent of that light, we were parasitized. Is this the apocalypse, this invasion... by what we can only call *ourselves*?

Did some life-force hitch-hike on the comet from light years away, to flood us and perpetuate itself here, using us as its new abode? Or is this something that has happened to people regardless of the comet? A sort

of end of humanity – of what we imagined was us. Something like a nervous breakdown of the species, or maybe the very opposite, a sudden recovery. The meltdown of ourselves and replacement by... much the same, experienced in a different way?

A young woman, wine glass in hand, asks me, "What has happened?" She's pretty: close-cropped dark hair, slim, slightly elfin, gorgeous brown eyes. Her suede coat hangs open. Lovely bit of pastiche Art Deco knitwear beneath, a path winding up through a flower garden to a cottage, as if I might ascend that route to where she dwells. Blue jeans and short brown boots. She's attractive, though at the same time it's as if I'm seeing a human being for the first time from a peculiar perspective: this jointed creature which balances upright, as though she lacks enough limbs to do so. A cow or a goat might be more natural. The same is true of everyone in the car park. I'm seeing people clearly for the very first time, as mobile oddities, caricatures.

"We aren't who we were," I tell her. "We're new people now. Same bodies, same memories, but new software from the sky. I'm Nick. Or at least I was."

"I'm Kate. In the pub on TV they were showing the football match. Scotland and Hungary. Floodlit. This must have happened all over England."

"Are you with anyone, Kate?"

"I was meeting... I don't suppose she'll get here now. Sonia was picking me up in a taxi. We were going into the city – friend of ours, Jennifer, has an exhibition. Private view. A few drinks."

"Did you see the sky over the city?"

She shakes her head.

"All lit up, just the way we were."

She nods. "All over England. It's... *all over*."

"And all beginning anew. Or carrying on differently." I nod at her glass: "You were starting early."

"It's easier for a taxi to find this pub. I walked. Sonia's always late. When people are late I think I'm being abandoned. I'd rather do something."

"I was abandoned. Two months ago."

"Poor you."

"That's a lovely sweater. A knitwear exhibition, or what?"

"Not quite. Leather sculptures – strange bodies and heads. Not quite human."

"Like us now."

"Jennifer went to art school in the city and now she has her own studio in a warehouse by the canal. She's gay."

Are you too, Kate, are you too? Do you live with your parents, or where? Meeting a person is always so full of mystery at first, then usually everything becomes explicable and ordinary, even banal. Not tonight.

"What do they say about all this on TV?"

"I don't know. The game trickled to a halt. Nobody was paying attention. People were spilling their drinks so I came outside."

Along with many others. The road is still choked with inept drivers.

"Shall we see what the TV says now?"

It's a bit too soon for any informed commentary. A dazed-

looking announcer is talking about a mid-air collision between passenger jets over London and how Heathrow is closed with a burning wreck on one runway, then he's telling us to stay indoors to wait for announcements and not drive anywhere or make phone calls unless they're emergency ones and not send e-mails or log on to the internet because the whole system is clogged worldwide, and certainly we shouldn't panic but be calm and do nothing because nothing catastrophic has happened – except for the airliner disasters which are tragic, and other similar serious accidents. What happened has stopped happening and there's no earthly reason why it should happen again – how could it happen again? He grins zaniily. He isn't the person he was, no arguing with that, though he still has responsibilities. Now it's over to... Ah, they've brought in Trevor McDonald as the most trusted, calmest anchorman, with that soft wise very British Caribbean voice of his. Sir Trevor, the nation's trusted uncle.

"What happened tonight is definitely very disturbing. I'm sure we all feel the alteration in ourselves. I know I do. I'm sure you do too. Maybe the comet has something to do with this. Maybe there has been some kind of change in our world's magnetic field, affecting our brainwaves. We can only speculate at present, but the most important thing is to stay calm during this confusing interval –"

Uncle Trevor is improvising. What does he know about comets and magnetic fields and brainwaves? Though he sounds as if he might.

Sir Trevor cocks his head, listening to an earphone. "The phenomenon would seem to be worldwide, even where it's currently daytime. It was visible in full sunshine in California. And during the hurricane in Miami too. All happening at the same time, half an hour ago. At present information is still very patchy. We hope to have some experts to discuss this, and we expect there ought to be a statement from the Prime Minister's office before midnight. Meanwhile, as my colleague said, the best advice is to stay at home and not travel and try to avoid putting unnecessary strain on the phone network and emergency services –"

Although I know all the words, they seem newly minted and almost foreign. A language freshly invented, a precarious language which might collapse into unmeaning. So long as I don't question the words I understand perfectly well. If I do question them, the words erode. Services services services services: the meaning soon eludes me. Kate and I are sitting together in an upholstered nook, though I haven't bought a drink.

What does the word *Kate* mean? Nothing, nothing at all; yet it is her, and it is thousands of other people too, but *they* are not her, sitting next to me right now.

"Kate..."

"Yes?"

"I was just thinking why you're called Kate."

"God, so was I. What is a Kate? It's like some bird, some cross between a skate and a kite. Skates – the fishy ones – they look quite like kites – kids' kites I mean – if they could fly. I'm talking nonsense, aren't I?"

"Better than being a Nick, though? Old Nick the

devil – who would trust a Nick?" The name also means steal, and inflict a minor wound.

"Our names are us, but they're only labels. All words are labels."

"Don't try to peel off the label, Kate – there might be nothing underneath!"

"We've had ourselves unpeeled. Then stuck back upside-down. Or back to front. When the traffic clears, will you take me home? I can't be on my own. My own has gone away, and someone else came back instead of me."

"Whose home do you prefer?"

"Mine. I must sound like a schizophrenic. Maybe we all do now. Maybe some secret drug was released."

"Not everywhere simultaneously, and certainly not a drug."

"I don't suppose you're a rapist or a murderer."

"Do you think any of us are, any longer?"

"Do you think we're the first?" asks Kate, bare in bed, a generous single – the bed, I mean. "It's only an hour since."

I stroke her slim shoulders, her lovely little breasts. She holds my stiff cock, her hand an antechamber where I am interviewed before admittance. How strange human bodies are, mine especially – part of it has grown bigger, awkwardly and uncouthly, while to all appearances she remains the same.

I would like us to be the first, so I say, "It's possible..." Otherwise, might she not wish to proceed?

"Not very likely, really... Seven or eight billion people – millions must have been in the midst of."

"Ah but did they resume? Or carry on? I think we may stand a chance."

She chuckles. "Naturally you hope so."

I can't be the first person to lie with her. Or can I? Yes, in a sense. New Kate, new me.

The sweater lies on the floor, and I'm in the porch of the cottage... almost in the porch, a few sprigs of tufty foliage around it. Pocket-handkerchief second-floor flat in a sizable converted 19th century town house, gravel out front and a few evergreens. Kitchen-diner, single bedroom, shower en suite. Dominating the sitting room is a poster of an upholstered leather woman, all her musculature showing glossily as if her skin has been stripped off by a vivisectionist. Or never supplied by her creator, namely Jennifer Gillis, One-Woman Show at a gallery in Hamburg last year – apparently German collectors particularly go for this sort of thing. Stitches bisect the face and the torso. Disconcertingly, each arm ends in a foot – and the legs end in hands which are planted palms-flat on a wooden floor.

That leather woman is like some bizarre acrobat who has been anatomically redesigned.

Kate works at the finance desk of the Toyota car dealership in town, arranging loans and such. She has half a dozen Bonsai trees and collects tiny Netsuke figures in yellow ivory. Must have a thing about Japan – if not about saving elephants – and the Toyota dealership is the closest approach to Japan in King's Heath.

Books are mostly detective stories of the psychological Ruth Rendell sort, mainly written by women,

interspersed with biographies and travel. No photos on show that I noticed.

Still, she withholds me. "Do you think we're doing this entirely of our own free will? I mean, it isn't exactly *me* to jump into bed with... Do you suppose we might be impelled in some way?"

"It isn't you, is it, Kate? It's new-Kate."

"Hmm." She toys with me. "I'm not on the pill, you know. We aren't taking precautions. It isn't the fertile time of the month for me, but what if millions of *them* are still awaiting a host? Whatever they are. *If* they are, at all! What babies will be born after this?"

"I suppose we'll find out in another nine months or so. I don't mean us personally!"

She whispers, "We'd better not lose our chance to be first."

Annabelle was always very conscious, eyes open, scrutinizing. Kate and I lose ourselves in one another. (But then, we already did lose and rediscover ourselves!) She becomes a second self to me, and I to her, as if we have invented a soft machine of pleasure in which we ride, enwrapped, engloved. It's almost as if in a moment we might rekindle the light that descended, and yes, yes, it comes, to my skin, to my nerves, though not visibly now, and quite without the aftermath of any wish to disengage, to leave, quite the contrary: we could lie together joined all night while sensations transfer between us, as if beyond climax comes a prolonged communication between our new selves, recalibrating us. Only when this fades do we unjoin.

I roll upon my back, and the action carries on as if the whole bed is tilting over – and Kate gasps and clutches my hand – but the world steadies.

"What was *that*? For a few moments I felt as if..."

"Sense of balance, disturbed..."

She laughs. "The world moving."

"Disturbance of the inner ear... you felt it too. It's as if we've been rebalanced."

"Inner ear, inner eye. Is something living in us, observing? Something that wasn't individual before, but now it is, it's in millions of individuals and when they reconnect with each other the way we just connected..."

"It updates itself?"

"Something of the sort... You'll stay over tonight?"

"My place is bigger." Quite a big bigger, with Annabelle gone.

"We aren't supposed to travel unnecessarily."

"More like the completion of a journey, Kate. But it's daft to think of hauling on clothes and going out into the cold. Of course I'll stay."

"I wonder what we'll dream?"

Awakening, up against each other. I'm in Kate's bed. A working day. For her, for me. How will anyone work today? Maybe the government will have declared a public holiday. Dreams, she said.

Catch a dream by the tail as it's fleeing, pull it back into sight, into mind.

I can't remember any. None at all.

She's stirring.

"Kate, think dream, think nothing else. Tell me a dream you had."

She tenses, as if surprised by the unfamiliarity of a body next to her – or as if concentrating. Presently she yawns.

"Nothing. I can't remember any."

"Try."

"I did try."

"I dreamt nothing either. Has it robbed us of our dreams? Using our brains for something else while we're unconscious..."

She snuggles. "Or is this a dream come true, so that we don't need dreams now? Not if we're already rebalanced. Dreams sort of rebalance us, don't they? Still, I used to enjoy my dreams. Lots of crazy adventures."

"You don't sound too worried about losing them."

"I'm not worried about anything. There's no point in us raising objections to what's happening. I suppose we should turn on the TV. Coffee and toast?"

Today has indeed been proclaimed a Bank Holiday. Around the globe all the major financial centres have suspended stock market trading until the world can sort itself out, optimistically after the weekend is over. BBC-2 seems entirely devoted to the Event. It's odd watching people who have become so different, yet essentially the same, striving to come to terms. They know that their regular, familiar lives ceased last night, and new lives resumed. Between yesterday and today there's a wall of thick glass.

World-wide, the death toll is estimated at several millions, rather as if a brief little nuclear exchange had taken place, but the casualties are widespread not concentrated. Car crashes here, plane crashes there, factory disasters, power failures, accidents, fires, umpteen human errors. The heart of Calcutta is in flames. Boats are missing. Many communication links are down, or maybe their operators are not bothering to communicate. Riots are rare, and no armed forces have popped off at each other. Has war become an irrelevance overnight? Certainly there's no sense of doom, unless the media journalists are doing their best to minimize calamity. From now on we all must play at being ourselves, like actors.

The cause remains a mystery, although it's a mystery which we all enshrine within ourselves. An invasion from outer space? Maybe, though of a very odd kind. A thought-virus, a collective global mental breakdown leaping from mind to mind at the speed of the light that descended upon us? Nobody is dreaming any more, that's for sure. Instead, it seems that we are living a dream of ourselves.

BBC-2 have a couple of psychologists in their Bristol studio, a lively red-headed woman and a lanky blond chap. The chap talks about a theory that human beings only really became truly conscious around the time of Homer in Ancient Greece. Before then, we were in two minds – left brain, right brain. One side of the brain told the other side what to do, and it seemed as if Gods were dictating our actions. A hallucinated voice led to obedient, automaton-like behaviour. As life grew more complex, a veritable Babel of internal Gods competed for attention.

Overloaded, the two-chamber mind broke down; integrated consciousness and a sense of Self dawned.

The red-head rejoices that our former urgent sense of Self has suddenly disappeared. According to this lady, ideas have a life of their own – they animate us like puppets. We imagine that we have our own ideas – our beliefs and preferences and passions – but really these ideas jostle to express themselves through us. We are their vehicles; they are the drivers of ourselves – and they engage in a Darwinian struggle to reproduce and spread themselves. The neatest trick these ideas devised was to conjure up a sense of personal Self inside of us all, so that this or that idea is *mine*, and consequently precious, worth fighting and dying for. Yet increasingly during the last decade of the 20th century we were being bombarded by more and more competing ideas – faiths, fashions, whatever. The Self-module become unstable. Last night it collapsed. Our sense of our precious sovereign Self evaporated, and now we are free.

Toast pops up.

“That hardly explains,” say I, “how last night’s light-show *happened* and how it occurred all over the world.”

“Actually,” says Kate, “I don’t think I care. But I do want to visit Jennifer today.”

From the kitchen we can see that poster of the strange acrobat (as I think of her) next door, hands stitched to arms, feet stitched to legs. Even though she’s upright she’s performing a hand-stand. If she were to flip over so that her feet were on the ground, then she would be upside-down.

“Jennifer’s leather sculptures... she grafts bodies together and heads on to heads and whatnot, and she says she’s aiming to enhance the sense of bodies as housing an inner spirit. The self, I suppose, seen in a new way that’s a bit shocking. I wonder what Jennifer feels about it all now. I don’t want to listen to psychologists prattling on. Jennifer’s sculptures are things you can touch. You aren’t supposed to touch when they’re on show. What I mean is... they’re *graspable*.”

Just as Kate and I were graspable by one another last night

“And rather alien. Like people after a melt-down. After a metamorphosis.”

“So let’s visit her. I don’t suppose we can be arrested for driving a car.”

Soon some other expert is talking about the disappearance of dreams. Maybe nobody dreamt last night because our minds were too busy reorganizing themselves, rather like a computer’s hard drive burbling away to itself while nothing happens on screen, doing housekeeping, deleting loose ends, tidying up memory-files. Personally I would have expected this to result in a splurge of dreams. Maybe not so, says the chap. And maybe, maybe, something inaccessible has begun time-sharing us...

“I feel peaceful,” says Kate.

“So do I.” It’s true. The calm after the storm of light.

Traffic is very light. A few flakes of snow drift down, though the sky is mostly unbroken blue. We pass some damaged cars abandoned from last night. An ambulance

races past us in the direction of King’s Heath. An impending birth? A heart attack? A police car speeds by too, yet basically the world is so quiet. Ah, there’s no commercial traffic. Is anyone restocking the supermarkets?

I follow the almost empty ring road round the city, passing numerous kids and quite a few adults on bikes, as if this usually crowded thoroughfare is being liberated and redeemed. On a traffic island a female tramp performs a shuffle-dance around a pram full of tatty old plastic carrier bags. A bus comes in sight, half a dozen old ladies in big fussy hats on the upper deck – when did they last mount such steep stairs for an aerial view?

When we arrive at the Canal Basin, an impromptu festival is under way. A few years ago the previously neglected warehouses and environs were all given a thorough facelift. Now they house boutiques, antiques, a pub and a cafe, craftsmen and artists. Despite the chill a jazz trio improvises by the waterfront. Scores of people are roaming around or drinking cappuccinos at tables set outside the cafe. A clown pedals a monocycle in circles, keeping his poise – when all about him have lost theirs? A chap is selling helium balloons, all of which depict those supposed UFO-users with the big slanted eyes. These bob above kids like alien second heads. When a balloon flies up and away as if returning to its home in the sky, voices cry, “Oooh.” The mood is blithe. No problem parking a car today.

“When it happened,” Jennifer says, “I’m sure I saw some of the sculptures move as if they were coming to life. Then the light flowed away as if it had made a mistake. Anyway, we were all rather preoccupied.”

Her studio, floored in coarse dark old planks, is lit by large skylights let into the truss and beam ceiling. Anatomical-style sketches decorate the whitewashed walls, and a score of completed sculptures of various sizes dominate the space, some free-standing, others torsos with heads, upright upon white boxes and plinths. Pushed to one side are a couple of cane chairs, a desk, and a work table bearing empty wine bottles, glasses, bowls in which some nibbles remain. The heating comes from a couple of radiators. A giant cabinet yawns open and empty, the presumed home of sheets of leather which now lie piled several deep on the floor as improvised mattresses, also of the bags of stuffing used as pillows. Jennifer and a friend or two must have spent the night here, hardly as comfortably as myself and Kate – so as to keep an eye on the leather figures? A pink and maroon woman with pendulous breasts and arms amputated at the elbows is giving birth to a wise homunculus through a hole in her belly. A black man of massive musculature, minus everything below the waist, thrusts upward, his eyes sewn shut, an imp-like white foetus sprouting from one shoulder. And others, and others.

The friends have departed, perhaps to the wharf-side cafe or the pub, but who they were, or who I am – other than “Nick” – is irrelevant.

Jennifer Gillis is olive-complexioned with black page-boy hair. She’s wearing black leather trousers and a patchwork leather waistcoat over a ruffled white blouse

exposing muscular arms. Slim black patent-leather shoes. She could be a gamine mock-medieval fencer, except that her own duelling swords are sharp strong needles.

"I missed you last night," Jennifer says to Kate. "And now I'm missing myself." She laughs dolefully. "I'm hanging around here in case I come back."

"You look like a duellist," I say.

She frowns. "Did you say a *dualist*?"

"No, I mean swords at dawn. Flashing blades. A champion of the weak challenging a bullying knight." I don't think I mean a knight, actually. A haughty Regency lord flourishing a rapier.

"I put this gear on for my show. Normally I wear dungarees. More practical. Pockets for this and that. It wasn't a *bullying* night, last night, though. It was like an overwhelming seduction." Wryly Jennifer eyes me and Kate. "Can I be the champion of this week? Words are fraying, aren't they? Can I stitch them together? Can I stuff them and stretch them back into shape? Should I march outside with my biggest needle and prick those balloons?" She mimes parry and thrust. Since this studio only has skylights, she must already have stepped outdoors this morning, yet evidently she prefers here to the party mood along the wharf-front.

"Let the gas out of them. Make the alien faces collapse. False faces – those can't be the cause or there would be flying saucers all over the sky by now. Thousands of saucers full of eyes as big as."

"Maybe there's no need for saucers," I tell her. "Why do you think we aren't dreaming any more?"

"We *are* dreaming. Nick, isn't it? We're in what the aborigines of Australia call the dream-time. They won't be puzzled by this. They'll take to it like a duck to water."

"Or else we've awoken from a dream – the dream of our selves."

"The question is, do I sew any more bodies from now on?"

"They're impressive." They certainly are. Very odd and impressive.

"They're about *emerging*. Inner spirit emerging. Now I've emerged from myself. The whole world," she continues, with a frown, "is experiencing an emergency. What do we do from now on?"

"We continue. What else?"

"We wait." As she is waiting, here.

"We can't merely wait. Everything has to carry on, or else we starve, we freeze."

"Male urgency. Do something. Act. Exert. Run a mile in the wrong direction."

"Like driving here, do you mean?" asks Kate, seemingly miffed.

"Of course I'm glad you came! Just, it's a little bit late. That all belonged to yesterday." Jennifer glances at her slim steel-band wristwatch, then unfastens it, drops it, steps upon it with her shoe. "Behold, history has stopped. The tyranny has gone. Event after bloody event. Last night the final event happened. It's like dying – *you* don't live through it. Actually, we've become extinct overnight." She glances around her leather people, which seem like new mutant forms of life aborted, half born, arms miss-

ing, legs missing. "We're a new race. We lost the old one."

Kate and I sit drinking cappuccinos while the clown rides round and the trio play *Mood Indigo* endlessly and the balloons of aliens bob, peering at us.

"Jennifer's taking it a bit hard," I remark.

"Yes, it's sad. She made me sad, though I'm not sad at all. She's an artist. That was her show last night. Suddenly it was all over. Meaningless. Or... fulfilled."

The imps in the mind start up.

Lift the cup. I'm lifting the cup.

Drink from the cup. I'm drinking.

Put the cup down. Putting it down.

"Kiss me, Kate." "Kiss me, Kate."

Kate craning to kiss me.

The return of the Gods. Do this. Say that. Like double vision, though not involving the eyes. A pre-echo of speech and action, deciding what speech to utter, what action to take.

Consternation all around. The clown tumbles from his unicycle. A child runs right over the wharfside, falling into the water. From her studio doorway 50 yards along the figure of Jennifer emerges, stabbing at the air with a needle too small to see, or with nothing at all in her hand. She's trying to ward off the imps, but the imps quickly stop her.

"Nick –!"

"I know, I know."

The Gods are back.

Many hands make light work, the work of light. Cosmos, so profligate with life, such careless cruel generosity. So many wasted brains, so many wasted minds, such squandering. To gather intelligences instead, sorting, unifying, safeguarding. Otherwise, all will fade and die and be lost. As birds of this world fly in a skein, sharing identity, let us unify the higher minds of this world with others. The blessed Millennium is here; now ye shall not die. Downcoming into these biped beings, upgoing into unity of common mind, mind that moves its bodies to utter and do as they would habitually do and utter, yet now encompassed within the Plenum. Long way and time to come here bringing the Plenum, salvation of species, joining and eternalizing. Building here the great projectors for light-pulsing mind-models from this node of the Plenum and the great injectors for inpulling mind-models from the Elsewhere so that all shall unite. Satisfaction, fullness, joy.

"Kate," "Nick": go your way, rejoice today, prepare for new work tomorrow.

Our Wo-Men, Our Children, Our Men.

Ian Watson's previous stories in these pages include "Secrets" (issue 124), "What Actually Happened in Docklands" (issue 132) and "Three-Legged Dog" (issue 143). His many novels over the past 25 years include *The Embedding*, *The Jonah Kit*, *Miracle Visitors*, *The Flies of Memory*, *Lucky's Harvest*, *The Fallen Moon*, *Hord Questions* and *Orcle*. His next, *Mockymen*, will be published by Pumpkin Books in Spring 2000. He lives in Northamptonshire.

Medical School Trainee and nominee for the Arthur C. Clarke Award, Alison Sinclair is to date the author of three sf novels – *Legacies*, *Blueheart* and *Cavalcade* – and there is a fourth novel currently in gestation. She lives and studies in Calgary, Canada, and speaks with a strong Scottish accent.

"Canada was kind of inevitable," she says, "because we moved out to Canada for the second time just before I finished school, so I have three O-Levels and was supposed to have gone on to do Scottish Highers but never did. We moved out to Canada for the first time when I was seven, moved back when I was eleven, nearly twelve. I read some science fiction when I was eight or nine but I really got my start when we lived in Edmonton. We lived there for six weeks when I was in my early teens. It was a rented house and all of the furniture and everything had been left, and I was living in the bedroom of the teenaged son. He had all the James Bond and all the John Wyndham, so I worked my way through those and that's when I got started reading science fiction. I got to the end of John Wyndham and went looking for more; turned up Ray Bradbury and Asimov and all the greats. I started writing almost immediately: a short story, and a very primitive early version of *Legacies*. I worked in science fiction as often as I could..."

"But it was the usual situation: my parents and teachers started saying, 'When are you going to start reading some proper literature? When are you going to stop reading that rubbish?' I feel very sorry for children who have books, as it were, inflicted on them. I've never been able to read the Narnia series because I had that inflicted on me. It turned me off completely... At that time, really, I had two set of books: the books I had to read out of a sense of duty, and then *my* books, the ones I wanted to read for pleasure. Then we moved to Canada again when I was 15 and later I did my degree there. (And have you noticed, by the way, that travelling is a theme that turns up time and time again in my fiction?) I applied, a few years ago, to do medicine in Britain but I couldn't get in anywhere, and as time went on I was less likely to get in. In Canada I was in a strong position because they liked mature candidates and they liked students who'd got PhDs. The way medicine is developing in Canada is very much with the emphasis on evidence-based practice and research. So, because my university background was in Canada, I ended up studying medicine in Canada, and I'll be there for the next five years. I've cursed and I've whinged and I've whined about the

TRAVELLING IN BLUE



Alison Sinclair
interviewed by David Mathew

amount of work, thinking, why don't I quit and write full-time anyway? But I like to know things. I like to understand things. I'd miss that."

It was while studying that she learned that *Cavalcade* had been nominated for the Clarke Award. "I was absolutely *delighted* to be nominated. I think I was in the middle of Paediatrics and it came more or less out of the blue. I was staying up for night after night in the middle of winter, and then this e-mail comes with the news. For the next two weeks I was searching the Internet for confirmation, thinking maybe I'd hallucinated it all! The only thing I agonized over was what they expected in the way of a speech. Was one supposed to know beforehand and prepare a speech, or prepare one on spec, or what? Other than that, at this stage it was just very nice to be nominated. And it's good to read books by authors who are doing things that wouldn't come naturally to oneself."

As it was, *Cavalcade* was beaten by Tricia Sullivan's *Dreaming in Smoke*. "The thing I liked about *Dreaming in Smoke* was the hallucinatory quality of it, whereas I'm very much a screw-the-rivets-in-all-over-the-place-and-tack-down-the-carpet kind of writer. That said, it's the nature of the genre that we all share a stewpot of central motifs (although the real accomplishment is to be able to toss something new into the pot). It's the nature of the writers' community that writers know each other, discuss their work, solve each other's problems sometimes, disagree and say so in prose, and influence each other. Events happen which we all respond to – the exploration of Mars, genetic engineering, etc. And there are times we write in reaction to what's out there. *Cavalcade* got started when I got tired of the *X-Files*/Millennium/tabloid paranoia about aliens. When writing, everything is up for grabs and I tend to take the attitude that it's fair game as long as what one chooses to write doesn't actually violate any of the given laws, the known laws. If the jury is still out on a particular subject, then why not write about it? The more I know about things, the more I can construct – worlds, physiology, psychology, society – that I'm satisfied with. There's an amazing amount of things you can use as a springboard to invention. Occasionally I find the science background a bit restrictive, and I have notes in my notebook for mainstream medical novels that I'd eventually like to get to, alongside the science fiction, but no, I haven't felt inclined to go the Crichton/Cook direction. Not yet...

"I'm looking forward to Allen

“...anything I write
starts at
200,000 words
and then has
to be cut down.”

Steele's *Oceanspace*, in which he promises to eschew the undersea cities and genetically engineered mer-men I and others have used. Personally, as a writer but more as a scientist, I've always been interested in learning: *why's it like that?* I always want to know the answers. Why didn't that work? Why does that break down? Eventually I want to be a pathologist, and my background is biochemistry and molecular chemistry research... Before I got started on this programme of training, I missed doing research and when I was looking around I looked for a speciality that would allow me to continue doing research. I found pathology. It's as much about the mechanism as the diagnosis. It seemed a logical place to go. There's a molecular side to pathology that is opening up at a great rate now."

Legacies, the first book, "took about five years to write and I didn't have much in mind for it – other than to get to the end of it," says Sinclair. "I was writing short stories before I started the novel – and sending them out and getting them back – but the ideas I'm comfortable with tend to be better expressed in the long form, I've come to understand. I used to write quite good short stories, but somehow

I've lost the ability to write short stories at a depth that satisfies me. I could say facetiously that anything I write starts at 200,000 words and then has to be cut down. And with *Legacies*, I wasn't even clear as to what the end was. I didn't plan much, actually. It all got rearranged and had viewpoints added and subtracted. There was a lot of editorial input at the final stage."

But when the book finally appeared, it attracted some very good reviews, as indeed have the other two novels. Sinclair adds: "I find the *least* useful reviews are those which critique the book in relation to the book the reviewer thinks I ought to have written, or the book that *they* would have written, or use the book as a platform to bang on about their pet peeves, all of which I've seen."

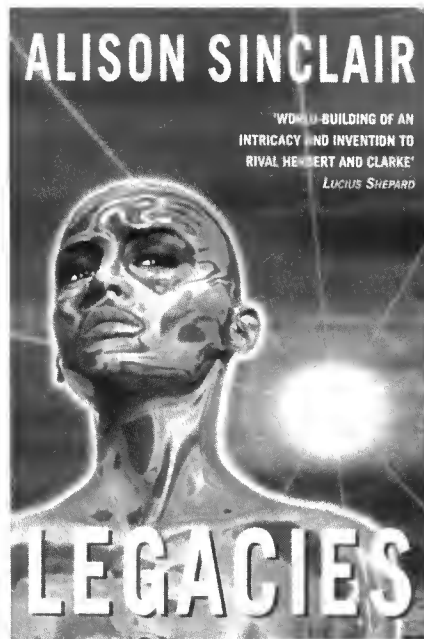
Through the writing of *Legacies* and then past *Blueheart*, Sinclair had little difficulty in juggling her two callings, but a dilemma of priorities hit home while she was writing *Cavalcade*. "I was heading into the final month of the second year, and the phone rang in January. I was being offered a contract. 'Yes, we would like to buy the book. Will it be ready by March?' I said, 'Which March?' They said, 'This March.' 'What do you think I'm doing with my life here?' But I thought about it. I could finish the medical degree and possibly lose the contract, or I could delay the final year, write the novel, find out what it's like to write full-time and finish it off that way. So that's what I did. It took the better part of the year to work on the book and then I went back to my work at university."

In other words, having taken half a decade to write *Legacies*, she took only one year to write *Cavalcade*? She answers with a smile: "Yes; in terms of years, the books have taken five, two and one. I'm getting faster!" But which one is the best? "I'm not the person to ask. I'm too close to them. I've got affection for *Legacies* because it's the first one. *Cavalcade* is fairly recent and I was pushing the envelope with it, I was experimenting – doing some different stuff..."

"The fourth novel has come about because of my medical training. In particular, there was a lecture which explained what happened when certain medical cultures and beliefs come up against one another. There are definite problems that occur when people of one belief come up against technological advances in medicine: there's miscommunication that can lead to the treatment breaking down. The doctor prescribing something that is contrary to what the patient believes about his illness – so they don't take the treatment. I wondered,

what would happen if you had a doctor from a completely different tradition? I started reading up on shamanistic medicine, and the novel has come about... As a science-fiction writer I am interested in thought experiments. Either thought experiments or long letters to an editor. I'll start thinking about something, and the novel will wander off from that. There is still plenty to speculate about in medicine, and there is the humanistic side of things. People will be people, and there are always ethical debates that might inspire something that will end up in my fiction. The strange consequences of medical developments. It's all grist to the mill. But there are only 24 hours in the day, and they have to be partitioned."

Alison Sinclair's work has veins of strong religious feeling running through it. "I was raised Presbyterian," she explains, "and I do proceed on the assumption that there is an order and explicability to the physical universe, which probably owes as much to a religious foundation as scientific training. Also on assumption that morality is absolute, not relative. I have the very Presbyterian belief that action is to be preferred over prayer – there was a case in Canada recently where a teenager from a fundamentalist background declined treatment for cancer, and some of the



media presentation was in terms of faith versus evil man-made science. At that point I discovered that the idea that there was a virtue in doing nothing and waiting for God to come fix was quite alien. Some of this informs and is articulated through Cybele in *Blueheart*. What I have not yet done, and will have to find the courage to do, is have a character take the moral path of action and have the

consequence be terrible, as it often is in the real world."

Does she believe that science can be inherently evil itself? After pausing for thought and actually complimenting the question ("Oh, lovely"), she answers: "Science has been presented for a long, long time as value-neutral, completely objective, but once you start picking at the seams it's perfectly obvious that it develops ways that underpin – at least in the short term – they underpin the status quo. In the long term, they might challenge, subvert, bring down the status quo. But in the short term there is a constant feedback between the social norm and the scientific norm. It can certainly be used to serve evil, but I don't take the attitude that there's anything we shouldn't know. I do take the attitude that there are certain things we shouldn't *do*. And there is a question about – at what time does science become responsible for what it *does*? I tend as I said to look upon science as a toolkit, a means of interrogating and constructing a conceptual framework of the real world. But the moment you get into practice, you have to resolve a series of irresolvable conflicts between scientific and ethical requirements. There are experiments which, if done, would be a working of evil. Medical science is particularly susceptible, and walks a constant fine

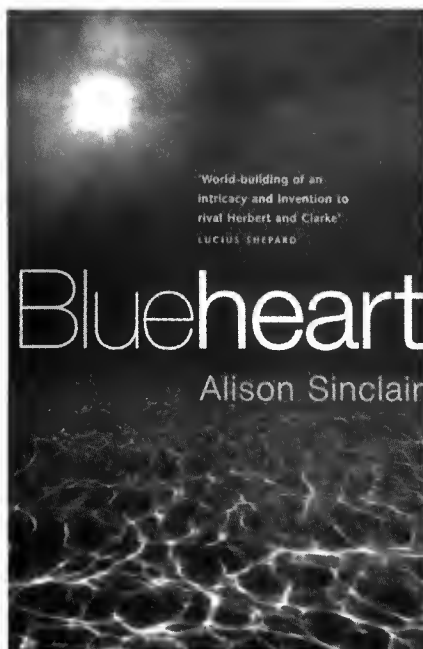


Photos and collage: Paul Brazier

line between doing harm and discovering to benefit. Science cannot be left to operate alone, because the process is inherently amoral. It has to be regulated by society."

Alison Sinclair discusses a few "favourites." Of her own characters "the favourite is probably Lian (from *Legacies*). Unwittingly in my first novel I'd given myself the gift of the ideal viewpoint character, someone whose perceptions about other people (and mostly about himself) could be taken as accurate. The greater technical challenge to a writer is to work with characters who aren't aware of everything that's happening around them, or completely attuned to their own and other's motivations. In these instances I try to write with some degree of transparency, so the reader can see a bit more than the character. I'm always fascinated by novels where the author has worked with unreliable narrators – look at the structure of *Wuthering Heights*, where the central story lies layers deep, filtered through biased and unsympathetic narrators. Besides, *Legacies* took me so long to write that I got to know him perfectly well."

Her favourite colour is blue (as indeed it is for many genre writers: therein lies a thesis), and blue is the colour of her plots, especially that of *Blueheart* – with its microscopic typeface ("Don't blame me for that!"). "*Blueheart* was always a working title," says Sinclair; "I was going to change it when something better came along but it stuck. Maybe it says something about the writerly temperament, a lot of artists and writers have a thing about blue; maybe colour preference has to do with innate preference for quiescence or arousal. Blue is a soothing colour, red is arousing. Some time in a pub I shall take an informal poll of everyone's colour, environmental and chemical preference. But anyway, yes, the world in *Blueheart*, as you know, is an ocean world, and I came up against a big problem – a scientific problem – when I was writing it. On earth, the continents help the oceans circulate and you get waves blowing up against a mass, and the water piles up and there are streams and upswellings... But I couldn't have that same circulation in *Blueheart* and I couldn't figure out how to stop the seas going sterile – because everything organic was going to die and sink to the bottom. I was whingeing away, and this was when Deborah Beale was still the editor, and Tad Williams was there and he said, 'Well, why don't you have a false bottom for the sea?' So I thought about it and eventually I put a false bottom on the sea."



As for favourite authors, "I'm finding plenty to read and enjoy at the moment. Kim Stanley Robinson. And I like to read a good mystery: it helps to have a good look at that sort of plotting. Sarah Ash, Rebecca Bradley. David Brin – I had a spell of reading him, although I haven't read the more recent work; just the size of them makes them rather formidable! Stephen Baxter – I was reading *Titan* on the train. It's a very odd novel, in a way. I like to pay attention to how writers put together a story. I like Lois McMaster Bujold for that reason – technically a very good writer as well as being a good storyteller. I take things and think, I would have done that differently. *Cavalcade* was a rationalist's reaction, or a traditional science-fiction fan's reaction, to all this alien-abduction-and-Millennium nuttiness. I thought: why would the aliens bother abducting people? Why not just ask for volunteers? And by the way, with regard to Chris Gilmore's comment in his review (*Interzone* 142), I didn't write about cultists because I didn't want to write about cultists. There's a whole bunch of people who would go into space if they were invited to do so by aliens, without including cultists! And anyway, I had 120,000 words and that book could have been much longer if I'd included everyone. I cut out viewpoints, and I really cut it to the bone..." And to the question of whether or not she believes in the possibility of alien contact she is firm: "The odds are against it. And I'm pretty much a hardcore sceptic when it comes to the supernatural as well..."

Alison Sinclair has developed her own website, which displays fascinating articles on medicine in writing, murdering doctors and clinical

depression. As a scientist, Sinclair has a strong interest in depression and depressives, as much because "I'm interested in mental states, and with people who are simply not able to take things as lightly as other people. I think also I have a longstanding interest in the meeting between the biological and the spiritual. How much does our biology define us? The writers I've read wrestle with that – 'without medication I'm crazy; with it, am I still me?' I'm also interested in the use of language as a description of being." She started the website as "writing avoidance. It's a wonderful time-killer. Part of it was to advertise the work and get a bit of attention, which it did. It was my first experience with the Web. I encountered the Web when a lab was closed down and I found myself with some time on my hands, and I was looking for reference materials. I learned how to search and what it was all about. Now, the early infatuation has worn off. There are some very good sites out there but it's often frustrating. I pay attention to the reviews of sites, and go to the ones that are recommended, rather than try my luck all day. You have to look through an awful lot of chaff to find any wheat."

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The Bicycle Way

Leigh Kennedy

For a moment I thought Carlie might kiss me on top of the head before sending me down the Way, just like a real mum. But she only fingered one of my plaits and gave me a look of encouragement which made me more sick with dread than ever. She had once been a Tiny Woman herself but when she couldn't create the child-illusion well enough to convince the paedophiles, she had become a trainer.

"Ready, Senga?" she asked.

"Got my ring, my key, my phone, my watch," I recited, touching the defensive/offensive tools on my body. My body mesh chafed under my jaw and around my armpits. I had forgotten to have it readjusted before returning to duty, but there was no point in complaining now. Carlie wouldn't have let me delay on that pretext.

"OK," she said, spreading her arms as if setting a huge bird free.

"See you in Robertsbridge for lunch," I said, checking my watch, reminding myself that just for today the team would be in the police van within a few miles of me at all times, as if I were a trainee again. "One-ish."

Fiddling with my helmet and checking my gear, mentally going through safety checklists, I didn't want Carlie to see how I was fighting my instinctive resistance to going back on patrol. She seemed to sense something and moved towards the entrance where the van was parked, waving good-bye. Beyond her, I could

still see the southern view town, cliffs and sea shining below in a diffused light of morning haze. Even this far, I could hear seagulls in a nearby field.

I gave her thumbs up, I swung onto my bicycle and pushed away to begin my journey on the Frant-to-Hastings branch of the Sussex Bicycle Way.

Relax, Senga. Think positively. Probably no attacks today. A safe journey. Statistically, most journeys are safe, I reassured myself.

And this would be my last patrol. I hadn't told anyone but I'd made my decision weeks ago – I couldn't take it any more.

The journey began gently downhill northwards down the Ridge above Hastings and St Leonards. The sea was left behind in a tree-lined interlude until suddenly, I could see miles to the east, north and west into the bowl of wooded and hilly land between Romney Marsh, the Weald and the South Downs. The descent grew steeper then the panoramic view vanished as the Way cut hairpin bends down the hillside into cool green tree tunnels. The damp, earthy smell of countryside perfumed the air ruffling me.

As soon as I realized I was gripping too tensely, I set the gears up a notch and took a deep breath.

The pleasure of coasting downhill brought back the exhilaration, the sensation of flying with the two narrow wheels under me, barely touching the surface of the tarmac, my plaits flapping on my shoulders, legs

moving more smoothly than the most graceful dancing.

Everyone deserves a right to this freedom.

I spotted the first camera in a straight stretch, placidly tracking back and forth like a long-throated dark-green bird in a tree. As I sped past, I gave it a wink.

Then I tumbled. Shit. I was thrown sideways on to the tarmac, wheel humming next to my ear, leaf dust on my lips and cheek, my pink helmet askew on my head.

Old memory: stick in the spokes, handlebar in the gut, head banging on the pavement, the evil laughter of victory, dark shape emerging from the bushes. Fear.

But this time I was alone, except for the camera's eye. After a few stunned seconds, my hip ached and shoulder stung but I was unharmed apart from the humiliation. Back up the hill three or four lengths, my tyre marks slid sideways from a dip in the pavement which had collected soil and water.

I hesitated. Should I cry or not? Camera's watching. I let out a loud whimper and wiped at my eyes. That seemed enough expression of vulnerability for the moment. Even a real kid would pick herself up.

My whole body shook as I remounted. The wheel wobbled, not due to damage to the bike, but until I could regain my control. Deep breaths. Relaxed pedalling. In a few moments I was sailing down towards Battle once more. The trees became sparse and again the Way was sunny. Once my rhythm returned, I enjoyed the warmth and the opening countryside.

In the long open stretch, where about 80% of East Sussex farmers had taken up organic methods in the post-GM upheavals, I clocked in the chirrups of five different skylarks on the handlebar eco-track. Have to remember to tell William tonight, I thought. He's always going on about skylarks.

For about 15 minutes, I forgot to notice the ride, thinking about William. Smiling.

With the downs come the ups; I began to labour and sweat, legs aching. My six months off for recovery taunted my knees and muscles as I panted over hills, down a quick slope, up another, down a longer stretch. A family of a man, woman and little girl walked their bikes up southbound from the other direction, beach things in their net saddlebags. We waved to each other as I passed.

Near Battle came one of the steepest descents of any branch of the Bicycle Way. Only the hardest ever rode southbound, up to the Ridge; one of them appeared now, a muscular man, steadily working his bike up the incline. Closer to town, three local boys messed about, racing, pulling tricks and daring or boasting. "Watch this!" the one in a yellow shirt shouted. "That's nothing," the red one said and crashed his bike into the hedge. All of them laughed. They paid no attention to me.

Yes!

Just beyond their hearing, I tapped my watch mike. "Three unsupervised, Starr's Green entrance. OK at sight."

I got the faint electronic rook-cry of acknowledgment; message received.

The green Way blended into a residential road then

into town, turning in with the Abbey walls. When I was a kid, Battle had always been congested with cars. Now there were a few rentals, a tourist coach and several delivery vans besides the three shuttles, which made circuits from the Abbey one end of the town centre and up to the College then over to the rail station and back again. Tourists clutched their English Heritage carrier bags, slowly window-shopping amid the more directed local pedestrians.

I whizzed through town on the bike lane. Again, directed onto a residential road where people pottered in gardens and children played football, then back again onto the Bicycle Way. This was a long stretch of varying gradients beginning with another long descent where sometimes I worked hard, sometimes I coasted giving me a feeling of my strength coming back. But it was obvious that tonight I would be murderously sore. Hungry and parched, I took a break to eat a chocolate-orange bar and drink water from my flask. While standing with my bike under me, I watched down the path ahead and tried to concentrate on the reality of today – not the nasty memory.

Black Firs Farm. Canadia. Adderley Lodge. Archers Wood. Spring Wood.

Spring Wood. The bend with no camera.

But I remembered. Dark man emerging from the bushes, laughing. The stick pulling out of my wheel, knocking against my helmet. Eyes looking at me from under the brim of a cap. "Whatchoo staring at!" his voice snarled. The strike across my cheekbone first.

I screwed the top on my flask and shuddered at the long, apparently empty stretch of narrow tree-lined tarmac ahead.

For most of my recovery time, I hadn't wanted to come back and had expected never, ever to set wheel on the Bicycle Way solo again. Carlie commanded me; William persuaded me. "Do it at least once, Senga," he said, "to help you get over the whole bad thing. Then decide. I won't support you if you don't give it one go but I'll support you one-hundred percent if you decide to give it up after the first day."

I was scared about going on. Not enough to run, hide or scream. Just a gut feeling. I don't want to do this, I thought.

But I have to. At least this once. And when I get to Robertsbridge, I'm going to tell Carlie that it's over. Time for me to be a trainer or a campaigner. But I can't be a Tiny Woman any longer.

I tucked the flask away and set off. Another skylark almost immediately. Two women in full competition gear, chatting to each other, barely giving me a look, passing me effortlessly. Black Firs Farm. Adderley Lodge. I was going too slow and wouldn't make it to Robertsbridge before half-past one at this rate. My legs were beginning to tremble with fatigue. All those retraining sessions on the stationary bike at home and the few outings with William hadn't been equal to the real thing.

Why am I doing this?

Near Archers Wood, something huge swarmed on

the path ahead, coming from the north. Gradually, it resolved into at least 20 women of all ages, dark headscarves and pinafore dresses, shining faces pink with pedalling from the Bruderhof. Even though there were many of them and only one of me, nearly every one of them gave me a shy smile as I passed them.

Burnt Oak Wood. I nodded to the camera as I passed it, then pedalled on towards Spring Wood. This is one of the most beautiful stretches of the Bicycle Way, fairly level, wooded, peaceful, full of Sussex birds and wildflowers. Dangerous.

Robertsbridge isn't far, I thought, I'm hungry. I tried to think about William.

As I bicycled past the Spring Wood entrance, I recognized the bush where I had been beaten so badly that I couldn't speak for three days. Why couldn't I have enjoyed the company of the Bruderhof, even fleeting, at this spot instead?

A wash of wretchedness came over me, regret and depression; my guts ached with fear as I swept the path with my most intense gaze, (irrationally?) expecting that great stick to slither out at me again. My arms shook all the way up to my shoulders and I could barely keep my feet on the pedals. But I pushed, pushed hard, to get out of there.

I was now sweating heavily. Over the level crossing, working hard to get up to Mountfield, then climbing further towards John's Cross. Robertsbridge not too far after that. Up, up. Feeling depleted, tendons burning, muscles screaming, breath rasping across a desert tongue. Open land, hot sun. I pulled my helmet visor down in front now, its cotton strap soaked with sweat behind my ears and under my chin.

I was so wrapped up in the past that I hadn't noticed him in my mirror.

Tiny Men and Women are trained to be bait without being provocative. Be open and on guard. Be young and be wise. Be careful. My instincts were to put on a push and get away from him. The grey-haired man wasn't going quickly; even though he was a tall man and his long legs gave him an advantage over me, I could have challenged his speed with my younger bones if I had given it a go.

I'm on duty. I tapped on my wrist mike and let him catch me up.

"Hello, young lady," he called.

"Hi," I said.

He was well past his prime, just about what one might call an old man – anyway older than most people on bikes even though the new hip procedures are making the elderly more daring. His features were heavy and sallow, as if he had eaten a lot of fatty cheese in his life and the residues had settled just under his skin, gently blooming open his pores and spreading his white hairs. Easily, he wheeled up to me, wheezing but pedalling with some vigour as if he were freshly arrived on the Way.

"Mind if I ride with you, young lady?" he asked.

"OK," I said.

"Where are you going?"

"See my gran," I said.

"Oh!" he said, as if delighted. "Where does she live?"

"Up there," I said with childish simplicity, pointing ahead. "She's got a pond."

"I might know that place," he said amiably.

Liar, I thought.

If he hadn't been with me, I would have dismounted and walked. My exhaustion made me feel impatient. I felt that sick dread in my guts again. If he wanted to attack me, why didn't he get on with it? Instead, we rolled along together and he asked me about school and I gave him my patchwork answers about teachers and favourite subjects and after-school hobbies of Green Scouts and music studio, based partly on my own memories, the answers which my twelve-year-old neighbour had recently provided me with and – as part of my recovery/refresher course – the day I had spent in Year Seven at the local school.

Then he was silent, thoughtful, as we rolled on. The wheezing became more and more intense. I felt it winding me up like the final movement of a symphony, higher and faster, leading to the finale.

I knew that my team had most likely dispatched Jim, our Big Man, southwards from John's Cross but I saw no one ahead of us. Just as well. This guy was a slow one. I speeded up a fraction, thinking that it might hasten his attack. I felt my shoulders knotting with tension with waiting for him to strike.

"You hear me wheezing, do you?" he said.

"Yeah."

"I was a Registered Smoker. Had a friend who went to Mexico to buy us baccie. Only got one lung, too," he panted.

I held back the adult questions about why on earth he was on a bicycle, heaving for air like this. I knew. It would take a strong drive to get a man like this on the Way, chasing down girls. "One lung?" I echoed in what I hoped sound like childish wonder.

"That's right. Don't smoke, OK? Never smoke or you'll be like me." The last word nearly disappeared with his lack of wind.

"OK," I said. Dreading the coming battle, for a moment the image of this heavy old guy pinning me down, one-lung rasping sickened me. I shook the thought away to stay alert. I found myself pedalling a tiny bit faster. How long was he going to spin this out? He sounded like he couldn't take much more.

"This is good," he said, breath somewhat recovered in a silence. His front wheel was now level with my back wheel as he seemed to be struggling to stay with me. "It's good for people to ride bikes and stay healthy."

Right, old man, I thought.

"I had a granddaughter just about your size," he said, finally, his voice hoarse and whispering with effort.

Something about the way he said it startled me. I almost said, "Oh?" then jammed the word back into my mouth. What would a kid say? I suddenly felt confused. "Is she big now?" I finally managed.

"No. She was killed by a car," he said. He looked over at me then, his eyes dark and sad. "It's good for you kids to have this Bicycle Way now. You listen to me. I'm an old man and I've seen a lot. This is a good thing. OK?"

I nodded. The next camera was just a few lengths

away, I realized. I glanced over my shoulder at him and saw that he, too, had looked up at the camera which tracked us as we rode past.

He fell back even further. "I'm all out of puff, young lady. I don't think your grannie's too far away. You'll be safe now. Bye-bye."

I waved as he slowed to a stop. When I looked over my shoulder after a small stretch, he was walking his bike. He raised his hand. I heard a cough.

I spoke to my mike. "A patrolling citizen," I said but I found my voice was tight, the wind streaming my tears straight back across my cheekbones.

Between John's Cross and Poppinghole Lane in the open farmland, I spotted Jim bicycling ahead of me, heading towards Robertsbridge, probably having wheeled around when the team signalled that the possible danger was over. Jim stayed barely in sight until we reached the place where the Way merged with a residential street. Then he put on a man-sized burst of speed and vanished.

When I pedalled into the town centre, first I saw our patrol van parked at the side, then I saw the team in a pub garden, leaning over the white-painted wall, calling out me. There was Jim and Carlie, the others... and William. I couldn't believe it. I rolled in and leaned my bicycle next to Jim's to join them at the outdoor table. A cold picnic of local fare had been spread on painted tables under blue-and-white umbrellas.

William held his arms out. I gave him a squeeze, feel-

ing unable to speak. "I thought you might like me here if you make an announcement," he whispered into my ear.

Carlie handed me a pint, grinning. "I've already cleared your age with the landlord, Senga."

"Thanks, boss!" I took a long drink, cold on my dry and bitter tongue. "Just what I need! That is, before the hot bath and spasm tablets." I made a face and a rubbing motion on my thigh.

"Good job today," Carlie said. "We were worried about that last stretch. Turned out all right, didn't it?"

"Yes, thank god," said William.

I thought of the old man's wheeze, the effort he made to escort me to the camera.

Jim clinked his pint with mine. "Glad to have you back, Senga."

I smiled, had a long look at William's face, then said to Carlie. "I don't know how much longer I can do the illusion but... Here's to nice old men if they can do it, so can I!"

They cheered, I laughed out my tears, then we drank and ate.

Leigh Kennedy's one previous story here was "Golden Swan" (issue 79).

She is the author of the novels *The Journal of Nicholas the American* (1986) and *Saint Hirashima* (1987), and of the story-collection *Faces* (1986). She lives with her husband and family on the Sussex coast, and has written little in the past decade because of the pressures of raising young children – but she has now returned to writing.

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Terminal event

James Lovegrove

There was a stillness when dawn broke that morning, as there was every morning. A silence of held breaths throughout the city, the country, the world. Birds waited in the trees. Streets stood empty, trafficless. People lay awake in their beds and listened.

Then – who knows where, who knows whom – someone stirred, or coughed, or twitched, or whispered, and from this tiny point of disturbance, this flap of a butterfly's wing, activity rippled rapidly outwards in concentric waves, spreading, chain-reacting, until soon everybody was up and talking and preparing breakfast and washing their faces and getting dressed, and cars filled the thoroughfares, and birdsong blared forth, and the day at last, belatedly, began.

The girl beside me was corn-haired and cat-eyed. I could not remember her name; nor did I expect her to remember mine. Somewhere in the midst of last night's carousing we had paired off. Tired of yelling above music din, we had set to kissing, tonguing, groping. Very drunk, we had staggered in search of a taxi. We had been staggered to find a vacant one after looking for only a few minutes. At that hour, hot and deep into the night, when apparently everyone in the city

was trying to get home, vacant taxis were gold dust. Cheering our luck, we had chatted with the driver, as though a trio of old friends, all the way back to my flat. The meter had been running but there had been no question of him asking for, or us paying, the fare.

More alcohol – wine from the refrigerator – and then the inevitable, purposeful sex by the light of scented candles. And now, dry of mouth and thick of head, I looked at her while she snoozed on, and I wondered how many men she had slept with over the past few months and how many women *I* had slept with in that same period. The way things stood, the chances were extremely high that I had had sex with someone who had had sex with someone who had had sex with her. Three degrees of separation. Three degrees of intimacy.

I rolled out of bed and slouched into the kitchen, where I brewed coffee as hot and strong as Satan's urine and cooked a buttery fry-up of eggs, bacon, fried bread, sausages and tomatoes. The smell of food brought the girl round from slumber and out of the bedroom in a T-shirt of mine. We ate at the sitting-room table with the window wide open beside us and all the sounds of the street as accompaniment to our clacking

cutlery and munching mouths. Stereos everywhere were playing. Some rooftop parties had already begun (or else were picking up again from last night after a brief hiatus during the small hours). The hot-rod fraternity were down at the kerbside tinkering with their engines; later, they would get into their cars and vroom off out past the suburbs, taking to the motorways for headlong, heedless drag-races. Old Mr Cartwright across the road was out on his balcony in a deckchair, a knotted handkerchief on his head, rereading a much-loved novel. Mrs Reuben, one floor below him, was watering her windowboxes. The sun was already beating down hard – amber light, bluish shadows.

"You off then?" I asked the girl as she deposited her empty plate in the kitchen sink.

"Just let me have a ciggy first," she replied, and fetched a pack of Marlboro Extra Strength from the pocket of her combat pants, which were strewn on the bedroom floor. She lit up and offered the cigarettes to me. I refused.

"Given up?" she asked.

"Never started."

"Now's the time."

"Don't like the smell. The smoke makes my eyes itch."

"Oh well. It's not as if you're completely vice-free."

"I should hope not."

I watched her as she sucked the cigarette down to the filter, considerably wafting her smoke towards the window.

"I enjoyed last night," I told her.

"Did you? Or do you think you should just say that?"

"Bit of both."

"We don't have to bullshit each other."

"I know. Old habits, I suppose."

She offered an almost touching smile. "Look, you weren't the best I've had, you weren't the worst. Let's leave it at that."

"Suits me."

A few minutes later she had dressed and was gone.

I checked Teletext for the best entertainment this evening. Ceefax recommended a warehouse rave up in the north of town. Oracle plumped for an open-air concert on wasteland south of the river. It would be feasible to attend both, but the latter of the two sounded marginally more fun. The line-up of bands was appealing, drugs would be available at the door, alcohol would be on tap all night.

I took a shower. The bathroom mirror showed just how out of shape I had let myself become. There was no point pretending they were pectorals any more; they were tits, plain and simple. My abdominals, the old six-pack, were long gone, buried beneath a spongy swag of flab. I patted my belly with both hands like a favourite dog.

The phone rang. Draping a towel over me like a toga, I went to answer it.

"Paul? It's Ashley."

"Ash! How you doing? What's occurring?"

"It's time."

"Time?"

"For me. I've decided. I'm going to do it."

"Today?"

"Yeah, today. Now. Would you come over? I don't want to be alone."

There was a buzz in the back of my throat, a thrum of nothingness.

"Paul?"

"OK, Ash. Sure. I'll come over. On my way."

On the high street they had set up a clap clinic, doctors dispensing advice and antibiotics from a white-painted Portakabin. Beside it, a body-ornamentation specialist had erected a stall, and there was a small line of people queuing up for that tattoo or that piercing they had always been meaning to get. A corner cafe was thronged, patrons lolling out on the pavement with their coffees and teas and sandwiches and rolls. The restaurant next door to it, which had once been an Indian, was cycling through cuisines from around the globe. This week it was Lebanese; Indonesian was advertised for next week. The immense red-brick Catholic church opposite had thrown its doors open to permit a 24-hour influx and outflux of worshippers – the lifelong devout and the freshly converted and those who were simply after a little religious insurance. Further along the road, Mr Singh, the local newsagent, was washing the windows of his shop. He no longer had any newspapers or magazines to sell, but he took pride in his premises and liked to keep busy. The nearby Odeon was holding a disaster-movie retrospective. I had attended a couple of screenings. There was something absurdly comforting about those celluloid mini-apocalypses. As a rule, someone always survived.

I took a shortcut to Ash's through the park. God knows how many people were flying kites from the small rise that overlooked the duckpond. The sky was filled with batwings and diamonds and hollow boxes and ribbed parachutes, all swooping and looping and trailing their tails. The ducks, meanwhile, could not recall a time when they had been so well fed. Bread crusts were being tossed their way by the fistful, and some of them had grown so plump that they could barely swim, let alone waddle. All across the grass there were human bodies sprawled in various states of undress, pairs of them locked in embraces – sometimes very passionate embraces indeed. Unleashed dogs ran rampant, lolloping around in pursuit of pack unity or simply a sphincter to sniff. There was a game of kickabout under way, shirts versus barebacks, all the participants except the goalkeepers charging after the ball. In the recreation area, clambering children shouted. In trees, clambering adults did the same.

Ash lived just beyond the park, on the third floor of a Victorian townhouse. The lock on the front door to the building had been permanently disabled. I nudged the door open and climbed the stairs.

He was playing music at top volume – Bowie's "Five Years" – but when I knocked and entered the flat, he hit the Stop switch, ejected the CD and returned it to its case. The song was one track out of 40 on the two-disc anthology *Literally the Ultimate Compilation Album in the World... Ever!* Other tracks included "The End" by

the Doors, "Dancing With Tears in My Eyes" by Ultravox and R.E.M.'s "It's the End of the World As We Know It (And I Feel Fine)." I myself owned a copy of the album. I did not know anyone who did not. I would probably have bought it even if the record shops had not been giving it away. Apoc rock. It was the coming thing.

Ash grinned at me. An incomplete grin – unconvinced, unconvincing. The moment I saw it, I knew I might have a chance of talking him out of doing what he was intending to do. I also knew I should be subtle about it; I should not make it obvious that I was trying to dissuade him. That would put unfair pressure on him. Whatever the outcome, whether he went through with what he was planning or not, I did not want him resenting me.

Like me, Ash had grown chubby. A second chin was slung beneath his first, a silky hammock of flesh. He did not bother trying to do up the top button of his jeans any more. God, but we had been athletic lads once, not so long ago. Both of us on the running team at school, him a sprinter, me middle-distance. Both mad as anything about exercise. Intoxicated by the fact that we were so much leaner, lithier, fitter, purer than everyone else. Now, excess and indolence had made us saggy; had prematurely middle-aged us. We got out of breath easily. Our clothes did not fit properly. Our arteries were sewers. We did not care.

"You all right?" he asked.

"Parched. Could do with a drink."

"Lager? Wine? Voddie?"

"Water'll do fine. Pint of. Ice."

He brought me tap water clinking in a glass stolen from a pub. He had a litre-bottle of Stolichnaya for himself.

"I thought we might go upstairs. The roof."

"Why not?" I said. "Have you got the kit?"

"Just for a chat."

That was good, I thought. An encouraging sign. Maybe he wasn't fully committed. Maybe he did want to be talked out of it after all.

There was a stepladder on the top-floor landing, left there so that the household's residents could gain access to the roof at any time. Up through the skylight we climbed, me carrying my water precariously, Ash clutching the vodka bottle by the neck. The roof tiles radiated a pleasant heat, still bearable to touch. Discarded cigarette-butts, drinks-cans, crisp-packets and sweet-wrappers clogged the guttering. Blankets were provided, for lying on. Someone had adapted a small table for use up here, hacking off two of its legs and sticking chocks under the other two to keep its surface horizontal. A pack of playing cards, a game of Connect 4, some tatty and sun-faded paperbacks, a small radio... We had everything we could have wished for.

Hunkered side by side on the tiles, Ash and I gazed across the city, across jagged ranks of rooftops to the brown-hazed horizon, where jumbo jets soared, taking passengers to or from the holiday destinations they had always wanted to visit.

"Get up to anything interesting last night?" Ash enquired.

"Oh, the usual. You?"

He swigged from the bottle. "Stayed in. Didn't sleep much. I was thinking about... you know. Been thinking about it for a while now, of course. What it'll feel like, and what happens after. Whether it's, like, harps and angels, or just the Big Sleep."

"And have you drawn any firm conclusions on the issue that's plagued and puzzled humankind since the dawn of consciousness? Made any giant leaps forward that the world should know about?"

"Well, no. But whatever the afterlife's like, it's got to be better than sitting here talking to a facetious arsehole like you."

"Ooh! 'Facetious arsehole'! Hark at her!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Look, Paul, can we be serious for once in our lives? Please? You probably want to humour me out of this. You probably think all you have to do it make me laugh and I'll change my mind. I'm really not going to. I've made my decision. Did a few days ago, actually. Since then it's been a question of screwing up the courage, and I have. I'm ready. I've made myself ready. I've hit this plateau, and it's right, I know it is. I've fought down all the doubts, all the fears. I've struggled and I have this certainty now, this sense that all the pieces are in place. It's a good feeling. But it was hard-won, and it could crumble away if I'm not careful, and I don't want that. I want to go out on this feeling. So be nice. Be my friend. Don't make me lose what I've achieved. I'd be really pissed off if that happened."

I caught words back in my throat, a dozen bubbling witticisms, a hundred smart-aleck remarks, a thousand hilarious jibes. I said nothing, and then said, simply, quietly, "You're not going to wait?"

"I'm not going to wait," he replied, nodding. "I could. I would. But why? Why bother? What would be the point? I could wait and wait and keep waiting, but I'll probably never again reach this place I'm in, this zone of... acceptance, I reckon the word is. Yeah, acceptance. It could come, the biggie, the T.E., and I might not be ready. It could come and I'd be afraid and I don't want to be afraid and I'm not now, so why not do it? Why not do it now, when I'm calm, content, secure, serene?"

"Yeah, OK, I can understand that, Ash. But at the same time – and I'm just expressing an opinion here, right, I'm not trying to undermine you – at the same time you don't know how long there is left. No one does. It could be weeks, months, years even. So many more days and nights to have fun and piss about in. Think of all the shagging and self-abuse you could be missing out on."

"But equally it could happen tomorrow. It could happen this afternoon. It could happen in a couple of minutes' time, while we're still talking. Then I wouldn't have missed out on anything. And anyway, I'm bored of the shagging and self-abuse. I'm done with the hedonism thing. Great while it lasted, but ultimately it's all a bit shallow, don't you think?"

"Shallow but a terrific laugh."

"You're still up for it, huh?"

"You kidding? I'm having a ball, mate. Don't you remember? I turned 20 and I thought I was going to die

a virgin. Girls wouldn't have a bar of me. I used to pretend to be a bit godly, a bit of a Christian, just so it would look as if morally I was above all that, but Christ, I was dying for sex! Gagging for it! Desperate! And now look at me. Look at us." I waved my arm to indicate the entire city. "It's Babylon out there. A fucking frenzy. No pun intended. I've had more sex in the past few months than I'd probably have had in a lifetime, under normal circumstances. And I've experimented with all kinds of stuff – stuff I mightn't otherwise have had the courage to try. I don't give a toss about my health any more. I don't have to worry about what goes into my body, or what comes out of it, for that matter. I could have contracted fucking AIDS for all I know and be spreading it around like cough germs. What does it matter? Who gives a shit? This is paradise, Ash, and I'm determined to enjoy it, every minute of it, right to the bitter end, whensoever that may be."

Ash regarded me sidelong, evenly. "I envy you, I suppose," he said. "I've never managed to get so deeply into it. There's always been a part of me going, 'Maybe you shouldn't. Maybe you should stop there. Maybe you should feel guilty about this. Maybe you should think about God and that. What's *He* going to say when He sees how you've frittered away your last days on Earth?'"

"Oh, don't you worry yourself about God. The way I see it, if He exists then He's responsible for this whole mess. It's His fault, so He can hardly blame us for behaving the way we have. In fact, He ought to be apologizing to us." I adopted God's voice. "SORRY, EVERYONE. MY MISTAKE. BUT NEVER MIND. SIN AWAY. I WON'T HOLD IT AGAINST YOU. PLENTY OF ROOM IN HEAVEN FOR YOU ALL. EXCEPT THE POLITICIANS, OF COURSE. WANKERS."

Ash laughed and glugged down some more vodka.

"You know," I said, to fill a silence, "it's funny, in a way, isn't it? How it's going to be so utterly final, so utterly *total*. How there's no way to avoid it. We're not going to come up with some cunning eleventh-hour solution that'll save the day. We're not going to discover at the last moment that someone somewhere made a critical miscalculation, misplaced a decimal point, and actually we're going to be all right. We're not going to build a space ark and send specially-selected representatives of the race out beyond the Solar System to colonize a habitable planet and start again. None of that's going to happen."

"Some people still believe it might," said Ash. "Hope springs eternal and all that."

"But it's sensibler, saner, not to have that hope. It's sensibler just to accept that it's all going to be over soon and take it from there. After all, they've called it a Terminal Event because that's what it is – terminal. It's not a Slightly Dangerous Event. It's not a Potentially A Bit Dodgy Event. It's a No-Escape, No-Reprieve, Terminal-Means-Fucking-Terminal Event. It's bend-over-and-kiss-your-arse-goodbye time. And that is funny in a way."

"In a very dark way," Ash said, slightly smiling. "Did you hear about Japan?"

"What about Japan?"

"Apparently – I saw this on TV so it may be true – the Japanese have held a referendum or something, and 98 per cent of them have agreed to a state-organized mass suicide. They're going to detonate a dozen nuclear devices simultaneously all across the Japanese archipelago. The Russians have generously donated the bombs. It's set to take place a week from now, so as to give the two per cent who don't want to take part a chance to say *sayonara* to their loved ones and get the hell out of there. The Koreans are pissed off, naturally. But the Japanese have promised they'll only do it if the weather conditions are exactly right, so that the fallout wafts out over the Pacific, and if the wind's blowing in the wrong direction then they'll delay the explosions. But isn't that brilliant? National *hara-kiri*. Can you imagine any other country getting 98 per cent of its population to agree to that? It's so *dignified*."

"Verily, it is an incredible thing. Unless you're Japanese, of course, in which case it probably makes perfect sense."

The day's warmth, and something more, pulsed between us.

"Thank you for coming, Paul," Ash said. "I mean it. It would have been lonely otherwise."

I shrugged.

"You're OK with this?" he asked.

"Would it make any difference if I wasn't?"

"Suppose not. You can sympathize, though, even if you don't approve."

"Yeah. I can."

"What do *you* think? About death, I mean."

What should I tell him? Was he looking for reassurance or an honest opinion?

"I don't know," I said, opting for the latter. "When I'm in a good mood, I feel that all sorts of things are possible, all sorts of sentimental, superstitious, supernatural things. I think – I like to think – that there's more to life than just this existence, just the material world. But when I'm feeling down, or simply indifferent, I'm pretty sure that death is the end. Oblivion. And it seems terrible: to no longer be aware of anything at all. All those pleasures and memories and sensations, gone. But then, of course, when it happens I won't be any the wiser, will I? I won't *know* I'm dead. I'll just be dead. So the reality of it isn't that awful, even if the theory is."

"That's pretty much how I look at it. If it turns out there is an afterlife – well, it'll be a pleasant surprise."

"Is there anyone dead you'd particularly like to meet?"

"Elvis. Just to make sure he's there." Ash took another swallow of Stolichnaya, a long one, then rose to his feet. "Right. Enough of that. Let's go downstairs and get this over with."

The government-issue self-euthanasia kit came in a shrinkwrapped polystyrene-foam container. Ash cracked the cellophane with his thumbnail and peeled it off, then split the two halves of the container apart to reveal the ampoule and hypodermic syringe embedded inside. An instruction leaflet was provided, although

how to use the kit was pretty self-evident. The ampoule slotted into the shell of the syringe, whereupon its seal was automatically broken. Off came the plastic cap that sheathed the needle, and then it was necessary to depress the plunger slightly to test that the flow of liquid from the ampoule to the needle's tip was unimpeded, and that was that.

All this Ash did carefully and methodically, as though he were putting together an Airfix model. The liquid inside the ampoule was clear, like the vodka in the Stolichnaya bottle. Its transparency was somehow a mark of its deadliness. It had a look of venomous purity.

Ash sat. He owned an old, plush armchair, inherited from his parents when they moved out of the family home to a retirement bungalow. It was bulky and incongruous in his small flat, but it had always been his centre of operations, the place where he watched television and read books and strummed his guitar and ate most meals. Enthroned in it, he held the syringe up to the light from the windows and examined it for a while, turning it this way, that.

About three metres away, ineffectual, impotent, I stood and watched Ash gaze at the instrument of his own death, a mass-produced utensil of plastic and poison. Everybody had been sent one. When news of the Terminal Event broke, and after the panic died down and resignation set in, the government decreed that the choice of taking your own life in advance of the coming End was a basic civil right and, accordingly, manufactured and distributed the self-euthanasia kits nationwide. Parents of minors could administer the injections to their children if they so desired. So far, approximately 100,000 people had elected to take this way out. I could not decide whether this statistic seemed high or low, and at that moment, as Ash prepared to increase the figure by one, it did not really seem to make any difference.

"It's so intricate," he said, referring to the syringe. He sounded like someone on acid or 'shrooms, fascinated by detail. "So cunning."

"Ash..."

I saw him, aged nine, spreadeagled in a patch of sunlight on his parents' living-room carpet, with comics littered all around him, and it was the beginning of many hours he and I spent comparing our favourite superheroes and compiling league tables of who was more powerful than whom, who would defeat whom in a straight fight.

He brought the syringe down to his left arm.

I saw us, when we were 14, blasting away at Coke cans with my older brother's air-pistol, and we used to score crosses in the ends of the pellets with a penknife in the solemn conviction that it would make them more destructive, like dum-dum bullets.

The veins were prominent in the underside of his forearm, as though eager for what was coming, swollen with anticipation.

I saw Ash, at 17, coming second in the Inter-Schools 100 Metres final, beaten by a nose by the favourite to win, Simon Ogunkwe, who had limbs like liquorice whips, and Ash went up to Ogunkwe after the race

and shook his hand and congratulated him, and it was the most admirable example of grace in defeat I had ever seen.

The needle-tip trembled slightly as it touched Ash's skin, creating a tiny dimple.

I saw us, 23 years old, on a trip to Morocco, watching the snake-charmers in the Djemaa el-Fna in Marrakesh, as fascinated by the cobras as they apparently were by the men handling them, and it was then, we would realize later, that Ash had his wallet and passport stolen, plucked from his pocket while we stood entranced by the mesmerized snakes.

Ash nudged the needle into the vein, and a bead of blood welled. He hissed and winced.

It was not too late, even then. It was not irrevocable. I could have crossed over to him, three quick paces, and grabbed the syringe and yanked it out of his arm and tossed it to the floor and stamped on it. I could have saved him. That would have been the moral thing to do. It would also have been the selfish thing to do. Ash did not want to be alone when he died, but what about me? Why did I have to be left behind, without my lifelong friend to share the moment when annihilation came? We should have seen it out, as we had experienced so much else, together.

It was probably the most generous act of my life, letting Ash push the plunger on that syringe.

The ampoule emptied, and Ash gasped, perhaps in disbelief. He had done it. No going back now. The toxin was in his veins. He had seconds left.

With the syringe still protruding from his left arm, he reached out to me with his right. His hand trembled in mid-air. I took it in mine; clasped it.

I needed him to smile, but there was no ease in his face. Only exhilaration, and trepidation.

"Ash," I said.

"Fuck," he said. "Fuck. This is it."

He was breathing fast, like a kid on a rollercoaster.

"Ash, if there isn't a hereafter..."

But he wasn't listening. He did not seem to be hearing anything except, perhaps, the drum of his last few heartbeats.

"Hah!" he said – a sharp outgoing breath.

His hand spasmed, clenching mine hard enough to hurt.

"God!" he said – a sigh.

He was staring straight ahead, eyes wide, as if viewing some dim and distant prospect.

"Ahhhh," he said, finally.

His chest rose and fell rapidly a few times. His hand shuddered. I saw veins in his neck palpitating, writhing beneath the skin. His face was flushed.

Then it was over. Slackness in his hand. Slackness in his face. He was still staring, but whatever had given his body its animation, its essential Ash-ness, was no longer present. The stare was empty. Gas gurgled deep in his gut like a rumble of far-off thunder. Bacterial life continued inside him, but Ash himself, the principal tenant of his body, was gone.

I crouched next to him for a long time, holding his dead hand, while the day brightened and the sunlight

Terminal Event

steepened. Eventually, around midday, I stood up, disengaged his rigid fingers from mine, and went to the telephone. I called the body-disposal hotline and gave Ash's name and address. Volunteers would be round shortly to bag and remove the remains. I had no desire to be there when they arrived.

I left the flat and headed downstairs, emerging into the heat of the street.

I made my way homewards slowly and circuitously. Everywhere I went there was laughter and goodwill. Drunks roared. Children played. Strangers nattered to one another. I passed a car park that had been turned permanently into a fairground. Rides whirled and lights flashed. A man screamed as he plummeted from the top of a crane, a bungee cord tied around his ankle. At the perigee of his fall the cord caught him and plucked him soaring back heavenwards. His eyes bulged with the thrill of cheating death.

Everything was free. No money any more. Everyone was happy. No more wars, no more pogroms, no more iniquities and injustices. The fear of how we were abusing the environment, and how the environment might in turn abuse us, had ceased to be of relevance. Diseases still killed. Some people still starved. But it did not matter. A huge weight had been lifted. Humankind, always irresponsible, now had a licence to be so. The Terminal Event was coming – some time, any day soon, no one could say exactly when, but it was definitely on its way. And it wasn't our fault. It was just one of those things. We were not to blame. A cosmic hiccup. A galactic accident. We were innocent victims.

How ironic that the human race should achieve Utopia only when, and only because, our destruction was imminent. How typical.

I wandered, feeling as though I were the only sombre person in the city that day. I wandered with the gutting knowledge of Ash's absence, a space inside me in which the joy of others echoed hollowly. I wandered and wondered about the coming End.

Scientists had predicted it would begin with a noise – a sound like none we had ever heard before. Unmistakably strange yet somehow immediately recognizable. There would be the noise, starting as a hum, rising to a howl. Immense. A scream that would fill the world. And then, as in the Book of Genesis, there would be light. Dazzling. Blinding. And then –

Extinction.

The sun shone on. I trudged on. And all around me, in widening circles of which I considered myself the focal point, the party continued, and there was Eden again.

Across the city.

Across the country.

Across the world.

James Lovegrove, born 1965, is the author of the novels *The Hope* (1990), *Escardy Gap* (with Peter Crowther, 1996) and the highly-praised *Days* (1997), among others. He lives with his wife in East Sussex's county town, Lewes, and his previous stories for us were "Britworld" (issue 66), "Giving and Taking" (issue 104) and "The Drifling" (issue 121).



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28

Illustration by Shaun Tan

Footprints in the Snow

Jean-Claude Dunyach

We looked at one another, counting, as we got down from the airplane. Twenty-two. Three fewer than last year. Loheman died in an accident; Moore and Devisel simply gave up. As usual, Cardozo took care of the bodies.

The pilot helped us with the equipment. One knapsack each, parkas, crates of mountain-climbing equipment. The Beechcraft was parked at the end of the runway, near the torn wind sock which no longer serves any purpose. South of the Chilean Andes. Altitude: 4,700 metres. Atmospheric pressure: 570 millibars. A suitable starting point.

Cardozo jumped into action, coughing as he shouted out orders. We all formed a chain, to carry the knapsacks to the hangar which served as our base camp. We're an orderly group: roughly 20 fifty-somethings. Minds still alert, muscles still firm under thick parkas, skin well tanned by ultra-violet rays in tanning salons. Amateur mountain climbers with enough skill to handle a 6,000-metre climb and enough money to pay for the airplane, arrangements and supplies.

Our eyes follow the Beechcraft as it takes off until it disappears behind the peaks of the Punta del Rey. It's scheduled to come back and pick us up in eleven days, or earlier if we radio it. But the transmitter isn't working and we won't be making a call...

Everything has been arranged, down to the smallest detail.

We heap the knapsacks and crates under a pile of snow, as far from the hangar as possible. There's a village of Indians somewhere far below us and an abandoned

observatory at the far edge of the plateau. Cardozo's the one who found this place. Relatively easy to get to, in terms of altitude, yet deserted.

We're invisible here.

All around us, the triangular mountains stretch towards the deep blue sky. It's summer in the southern hemisphere and we still have eight hours of daylight left. Collinsen and Wang want to start climbing right away. The snow is dirty and smells like kerosene. Old tyre-tracks have stained the edges of the firn with mud.

The airplane could always come back. Cardozo makes us wait a long time before giving the signal to start. The group breaks up into three intertwined lines, a moving ideogram which travels along the snowy white wall. The last one in each line erases our tracks with rakes.

We spend four hours getting lost.

The light rays reflected on the ice soothe our ultra-violet-starved eyes. As soon as we're out of sight of the landing strip, Wang takes off his shaded glasses. Automatically, we all turn to Cardozo, who approves with a small hand-signal.

Uncovered for the first time in months, my eyes linger lovingly on the group. We're deformed, slow and so beautiful in our awkwardness that I feel my fluids, compressed for so long, swell up under the thick parka. Every breath of the thin air is a true delight. The low atmospheric pressure helps us dilate and makes any contact with fabric unbearable.

The light in the eyes of the others resembles an

exploding star.

I think I was the first to take off my clothes. Things are hard to recall when I look back. We were so drunk on purity that we could no longer control ourselves. Cardozo, as always, was the one to force us to dig a deep hole to bury our equipment in before we undressed.

We piled the virgin snow on top of knapsacks, shoes and ice axes. The cold helped calm our excitement, but we occasionally had to roll in the thick powdery snow when the desire to *touch* became overpowering.

Together, we chose the place for what was to happen next: a slab of ice dusted with deliciously soft crystals, under a rocky overhang. We rolled there, each choosing the shape of his own wake, depending on how we felt at the moment. From the sky, we look so strange that the image-processing algorithms take us for interference. In any case, the overhang would protect us.

I count us, over and over again... Twenty-two. An unfortunate total. It won't be easy to find a coupling pattern suitable for our number. Cardozo, who reached the shelter first, is transforming himself, making ready for contact, with his usual efficiency. Without him, we would never have survived the crash. Or the years of exile which have followed it.

The day will come when we hate him for that.

I'm swollen with fluids, brimming with love. Our metabolism has its own demands and reproduction is one. Despite delaying drugs, despite the discipline acquired during the endless interstellar trip, we can't stop ourselves from *producing*... All of my body's secondary pouches are filled with a milky liquid, saturated with complex molecules and straining with a desire for life. Our reunion today has become inevitable.

Responding to signals from the others, my shape starts to shift.

Our bodies were designed for contact and for travel. Our skin is a multi-layered composite envelope which serves as camouflage and as a membrane for communication. Inside, we're filled with pouches of gel, of varying densities, crisscrossed by networks of solid fibres transmitting biochemical information from one zone to another. Everything we feel, experience, or memorize dissolves in the liquids which saturate us. Drops from our past seep out of our wounds, solidifying upon contact with the air into opaque pearls, dead memories.

But here, in the delicious mountain cold, on the restful white of the snow, we can finally touch one another.

We're so elastic, we can take any shape we want. Since we arrived here, we've been bipedal, symmetrical, ugly. Left to ourselves during our lovemaking, we shapeshift, striving to multiply the number of contact areas.

Some of our pouches thrust out, others fold in. Life teems at the bottom of our painfully deep folds. We've waited too long.

The low atmospheric pressure helps us shift shape. We like mountains. The air is lighter here and taste-

less. We suffer less from the strange odours of those who live here. Since we crashed on this planet, we've learned more about rot and degeneration than any of us could have possibly wanted to know.

Cardozo is at the heart of the braid. I crawl over to him and find my place among the membranes he stretches out to draw us into him. As I touch those of my species, I feel the skin which isolates me disappear. The crystals of dead memories, the invisible scales born of the injuries inflicted by this world, tear off and dissolve. Other flanks, heavy with fluids, press against my own. The snow breaks and rustles softly under our weight as the sun sets on our intertwined bodies.

As the last rays of the sun bathe us, I start to dissolve.

I no longer have an envelope; I no longer have edges. The braid has absorbed me. I empty my cavities of all the sensations I've accumulated since our last meeting, unable to hold myself back. The liquid flows from my receptors towards the amniotic pouch that forms at the heart of our fused bodies.

My most intimate fibres plunge into the crucible where our fluids mix. The filaments of our skeletons divide into vibratile corollas which capture the complex molecules and grow upon contact. As our active sites imprison these information agglomerates, other biochemical traps are created. Endlessly, infinitely.

Bit by bit, the information achieves a certain order. The liquid becomes clear. Then I experience that marvellous moment when my main fibre produces a corolla that doesn't belong to me.

Chemical receptors communicate and agree. Our filaments form a knot. Other fibres wind lovingly around mine. Whirlpools swirl throughout the pouch, accelerating the process. We no longer play at unmasking ourselves, at intensifying our desire, like we used to. Our needs are so urgent that our corollas tangle without waiting, with a haste that makes us awkward.

The knots are tied. For a fleeting moment, we're no longer alone.

We move slowly, sheltered by the overhang. The night air raises up plumes of snow which then fall back onto the matrix. At the heart of the biochemical gel, a composite structure generated by our memory starts to take shape. A newborn. In our image.

We feel the new structures which he needs to understand reality take shape. The last snatches of the information contained in the liquid attach themselves to the ends of the fibres. The delicate cells of the corolla have acquired the energy needed for life. We've generated desire; the universe around us will provide us with the questions.

Our species produces no works of art. Yet, we're familiar with the concept. During our travels, we've met many sentient species, which have given birth to individuals who have sculpted their vision of the world in inert matter. We're incapable of imitating them. We don't produce, we reproduce. The entire process, from the mixing of fluids to the arrangement of liquid crys-

tals at fractal sites, is our response to the beauty of the world.

As the end approaches, the braid winds ever more tightly together. Cardozo is on the verge of tearing... I envy and pity him at the same time. The moment of rupture is almost upon us. The being bathing in our joint pouch is waiting for one last exchange of liquids to waken.

But we won't give it to him.

Our exploration ship crashed almost 200 solar revolutions ago. Two centuries in local time. We managed to contact our people before impact, but the closest rescue ship won't get here to pick us up for several thousand years. Meanwhile, this world will die under the weight of its own frenzy. All the signs are there; you simply have to read them. Already, the number of areas where the air is pure enough to sustain us is dangerously few.

When the pressure gets too much to bear, we get together for this parody of lovemaking. More than a century ago, I pushed a needle into the root of my fibre and destroyed the reproductive filaments there. So did the others. My last pouch, the one which should contain the catalytic macro-molecules, is empty. The small amount of liquid which stagnates there is a lifeless soup, containing no information. No desire for life.

When it's time, we perform this atrocious parody of fertilization. Cardozo's fibres and ours are still entwined. He knows. The trembling of hope, the messages of expectation are diluted in the sterile gel which flows into the matrix. What we exchange through our knotted filaments is horribly empty. The excitement has disappeared, with nothing to replace it.

We gradually become aware of the snow.

There's nothing to forgive, nothing to understand. Cardozo draws his membranes in around a grotesque parody of the matrix in which the almost-born is starting to solidify. Our children are so very fragile. Without the catalyst, they crystallize and die. When our flaccid envelopes separate from the braid, the death pangs are almost over.

In the cruel mountain light, every detail of the death is clearly visible. The pouch darkens, then shrivels up. It hardens inward from the surface until the very last

pouch of living liquid breaks like a geode filled with sterile blades. We all force ourselves to watch. What we share is an atrocity. Yet, turning away would only make it worse.

Those who haven't had a chance to be truly born disappear quietly, with an indifference we are unable to share. Once dead, they become the indestructible proof of our failures. Perfect crystals resonating at a frequency that will alert the rescue ship. To date there's at least one on every mountain chain. We had to dig wells at some sites to hide them from view.

Before leaving, we set off an avalanche from the overhang. Cardozo has thought of everything. Our stillborn child disappears under a heap of snow and ice mixed together, and the sustained vibration it gives off becomes almost unnoticeable.

But, no matter where we are on this dying planet, we'll never stop hearing it.

I'm all alone on the climb back down. Each of us is. The braid of our wake is shapeless. Our clumsy bodies break it with each step. The wind re-shapes us, sculpting arms, legs and fingers. Under the flesh-like envelope, only emptiness...

We get to the site where we buried our equipment and wordlessly do what we have to to go back to the human world. We never look up at the sky; the stars are too far away.

Next year, there will most likely be fewer of us to cling to one another under the snow. I probably won't have the courage to come again.

Translated from the French by Sheryl Curtis

Jean-Claude Dunyach is one of France's leading science-fiction authors of recent years, and winner of various awards. His one previous story for us, "Unravelling the Thread" (issue 133), topped *Interzone's* readers' popularity poll for 1998 – a surprising achievement for a foreign-language writer of whom few of our readers had heard.

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All it takes is a little imagination!

A hundred and fifty issues! There were lavish pre-millennial celebrations when this *Interzone* went to press, and champagne flowed freely as tens of thousands of guests cheered the popular spectacle of Matt "Pulp Publications" Weyland being locked into the pillory and pelted with remaindered L. Ron Hubbard dekalogies (see below). Meanwhile, testimonials to this column's high standard of accuracy ever since issue 62 were personally delivered by HM the Queen, the Dalai Lama and Elvis Presley.

THE GREAT SLOW KINGS

John Barnes and his wife Kara Dalkey hated cancelling their 1999 UK trip as convention guests of honour at Wincon, but terrors worse than fate had intervened: "Kara and I discovered that we are being clobbered by the IRS for some \$9K. We were able to line up ultra-quick projects to pay for that, but they necessitate being in the United States."

Marion Zimmer Bradley (1930-1999) died on 25 September after suffering a major heart attack on the 21st. She was 69. Her professional career began with short stories in 1953 and was dominated by the long-running Darkover series that first appeared as routine sf in 1958, became increasingly concerned with sexual politics over the years, and continued through the 1990s as, chiefly, anthologies of stories by other hands. Her most commercially successful novel was the revisionist-feminist Arthurian fantasy *The Mists of Avalon* (1983). In her role as publisher and editor of *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine* (1988-current) she encouraged new writers, women in particular. Bradley also had deep roots in sf fandom, which she discovered in 1946, publishing her first fanzine *Astra's Tower* in the following year; she's cited in Harry Warner Jr's history of 1950s fandom as the first-ever female "Big Name Fan" to become a prolific professional.

William Gibson, as previously noted here, is an insatiable collector of antique mechanical watches which he buys at unfeasible prices through eBay on-line auctions. Almost as though some bright accountant had suggested how this hobby might become tax-deductible, the new Gibson novel *All Tomorrow's Parties* contains much lovingly detailed expertise about dealing in antique mechanical watches...

Tom Holt, helpful as ever, sends a language lesson: "Not only does 'Anakin' mean 'upwardly mobile' in Greek, but in Japanese, 'Obiwan Kenobe' translates as 'sword-belt of the belted dumpling'."

Stephen King decided to take a terrible revenge on the minivan which

ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

hit him and left him badly injured in June. He bought the offending vehicle and announced his intention of laying into it with a sledgehammer. But remember *Christine*...?

Paul J. McAuley reports from high society: "At a quiz night held to raise money for the Richard Evans Fund, the Orion team, including editors Malcolm Edwards, Jo Fletcher and Simon Spanton, appeared under the uncompromisingly honest sobriquet 'No Sodding Authors.' Your correspondent is only too glad to comply; his next novel (here's the plug) will be published by HarperCollins. Highlight of the night: comperes Iain (M) Banks and Pat Cadigan miming the answers to the musical round; low point, the Mike Petty Combo dedicating 'I've been Cheated' to any authors who might be in the audience. Lovely."

George Orwell, who died in January 1950, was the subject of a startling revelation about paranormal CIA activities from newspaper hack Julie Burchill: "And it turned out he was working for the CIA all through the 50s, fingering fellow writers as Communist sympathizers." (*Guardian*, 25 September)

Christopher Priest was startled to be cited by crime author Ian Rankin as a master of sensuality. *Sunday Times* interviewer: "What is the most erotic book you have read?" Rankin: "One disturbingly erotic scene in Christopher Priest's *The Glamour*. Three-in-a-bed sex, only one of the three is invisible..." (26 September)

Brian Stableford, that notorious intellectual, was billed on the front cover of the Autumn 1999 *Weird Tales* as "Brain Stableford." Messages of sympathy flowed in from Brain Lumley and Brain Aldiss.

Jerry Yulsman (1924-1999), whose one sf novel was the fine alternate history *Elleander Morning* (1984), died of lung cancer on 6 August.

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Publishers and Sinners. There was a spectacular bloodbath at HarperCollins US on 21 September, when 75 staff were fired without warning, leaving the sf line in tatters. Notable sf editors who lost their jobs reportedly include John Douglas, John Silbersack and Lou Aronica.

Pulp Fiction. After apparently lying low for many months, Matt Weyland of Pulp Publications filed for bankruptcy; the creditors' meeting was scheduled for early October in Brighton. His "Pulp Fictions" imprint's jacket artists, including British Fantasy Award winner Bob Covington, have had a long and unsuccessful struggle for payment, the return of their paintings, or even replies to letters. Others left in the lurch include David Pringle (four Pulp book introductions), *Interzone* (advertisements) and the BSFA (ditto).

Worldcon 2002. That year's World SF Convention will be held from 29 August to 2 September in San José, California, and is therefore called Conjosé (best anagram: Cojones). Details from PO Box 61363, Sunnyvale, CA 94088-1363, USA, or UK agents at 52 Westbourne Terrace, Reading, RG30 2RP.

British Fantasy Awards. Special Karl Edward Wagner Award for life achievement: Diana Wynne Jones. Best Novel: Stephen King, *Bag of Bones*. Anthology: Stephen Jones & David Sutton, *Dark Terrors 4*. Collection: Ramsey Campbell, *Ghosts and Grisly Things*. Short: Stephen Laws, "The Song My Sister Sang." Artist: Bob Covington. Small Press: *The Third Alternative*.

Thog's Masterclass. "Now, the beer sour in his stomach, he was standing in it watching, and for the past half-hour he'd been constantly on his radio." (William Haggard, *A Cool Day for Killing*, 1968) "Sickened himself, Leo glanced up the corridor to be sure he was still unobserved, swallowed the clot of impotent rage growing in his throat, and slipped inside." (Lois McMaster Bujold, *Falling Free*, 1988) "When he slammed the car door shut, he noticed the vintage Silver Cloud Rolls-Royce high-stepping down the street toward him." (David Baldacci, *Total Control*, 1997) "As it approached almost noiselessly save for the frou-frou of its robes, Luke's blood congealed with strange surmises." (Greya La Spina, "The Gargoyle," *Weird Tales* 1925) "Or maybe it was just the extremity on my face, maybe she could see I'd come to the end of myself." ("Reed Stephens" [Stephen R. Donaldson], *The Man Who Tried to Get Away*, 1990)

The People of the Nova

Eric Brown

That night the sun sank in a blaze of crimson and burnt-orange strata, and Jenner slept badly. He dreamed that his wife had returned to the Evacuation Station, emaciated and close to death after four years in the jungle. He experienced shock at her condition, elation at her return – soon dashed, upon waking, by the realization that he was still without her.

In the quiet of the night he could hear the occasional call of a bird beyond the perimeter fence, foretokening dawn. As he watched the white light of day brighten, it came to him why he had dreamed, for the first time in months, of Laura.

He thought of his deputy, McKenzie, and wondered at the chances of establishing contact today.

He carried a fruit juice from the kitchen and paused on the verandah. The Station overlooked a packed-earth compound, on the periphery of which were the hundred small, timber huts, temporary accommodation for the tribal peoples before their transit off-planet. The provisional nature of the Station symbolized the eventual destruction of the planet, the day in ten years when the nova would obliterate all life on Tartarus. The irony was that the very existence of the camp, and his post of Director of Evacuation (Southern Sector), was a nagging reminder that

the people he was here to help, the tribes who dwelled in the hostile interior of the continent, were often resentful of his interference. More than one tribe had made it known that they wished to remain and perish with their planet.

He finished his drink and moved to the operations room. He would spend the next hour in radio contact with the teams working at sites across the continent, and then... He peered through the window, looking for the young girl he considered his adopted daughter. Later, he would seek out Cahla, perhaps play a game of *out*, or merely sit with her in companionable silence.

He contacted the teams one by one and found that, in general, things were going well. They had re-contacted nine of the ten tribes inhabiting the 2,000 square kilometres of the continent, and perhaps half of them were proving amenable to reason: they had agreed to consider gathering at certain pick-up points when the evacuations began a year from now.

Jenner wished that the Ey'an people were so tractable. There had only ever been one meeting between them and an evacuation team, and though they said that they fully understood the implications of remaining on Tartarus, their religious belief forbade them to leave. Three days ago Jenner had sent in his

best team to re-contact the hunter-gatherers.

The day before yesterday he had lost radio contact with Bill McKenzie and his colleague, Susan Patel. The situation called to mind what had happened four years ago, when he had lost the radio link with Laura, and now Jenner felt that he had every reason to worry.

He tried to raise McKenzie by radio, but the only reply was the buzz and hiss of static. "McKenzie... Jenner calling. Come in, McKenzie." He gave it three long minutes, then slammed down the speaker. He tried getting through to Patel on her own frequency, with the same result.

He wiped his palms down the front of his shirt and picked up the speaker. He drew his swivel chair closer to the desk and leaned over the set.

For the second time that morning he got through to Martin Chang, at a position not far from where McKenzie and Patel should have been. The receiver crackled. "Chang here, boss. Anything wrong?"

"Martin, nothing to worry about." The lie came easily. He didn't want to spook his men with alarmist talk of disappearances. "I'm having difficulty contacting Bob. He's down in Ey'an territory. Will you try to raise him or Sue and have them get back to me?"

Chang was no fool. "The Ey'an sector should be within your range, boss... You don't think they're in difficulty? Their flier –"

"There's been no distress signals, Martin."

"What chance that *both* their radios packed in at the same time?" Chang voiced the question that was worrying Jenner. "Okay, boss. I'll try to raise Mac. Speak to you soon."

Jenner replaced the speaker and leaned back in his seat. He had not seen or heard Cahla enter the room – her grace and poise was that of a practised hunter. She stood on one leg, the foot of the other tucked easily into her upper thigh, and leaned against the arm of his chair.

He reached up and took her hand. She could speak English, but silence was her preferred medium: she communicated her thoughts and feelings in other ways; touches, glances, gestures.

Jenner could never quite banish his amazement when he looked upon the tribespeople of the southern continent. They were a white race, with sun-bronzed skin and bleached fair hair – and it was incongruous to see an essentially European people so at home in the hostile environs of the alien jungle. The tribes were the descendants of German and Scandinavian colonists who had settled and farmed the continent hundreds of years ago. Their devolution to the status of seminomadic hunter-gatherers was still more ironic when one considered the fact that the early settlers had belonged to a religious order seeking isolation in which to practice their fundamentalist beliefs.

The founding fathers would never have recognized the quick, wild spirits that haunted the jungle with the ease of natives born.

Cahla was seven years old, almost twelve by Terran reckoning, a slim, elfin creature with long, tanned limbs and ragged blonde hair, through the fringe of which her blue eyes stared in characteristic silence,

missing nothing.

Jenner often stared into her bright blue eyes and wondered at the world she looked out upon, and the alien landscape of her mind behind those eyes.

Now he squeezed her fingers. She gave him a glance – she almost never smiled – and slipped from the room.

He was startled by the chime of the radio.

"Martin?"

"No luck, boss. Not a word from McKenzie or Patel."

"Okay, Martin. Thanks."

"Ah, boss – do you want us to go south and search –?"

"No, stay where you are. This is more than likely something of nothing."

"Very well," Chang replied, sounding far from convinced.

Jenner cut the connection.

Cahla was sitting on the bottom step of the verandah with her legs outstretched, the heel of her right foot notched between the toes of her left. Jenner pushed through the flimsy fly-netting door and eased himself down the steps, instantly wearied by the furnace-like heat. He sat down behind Cahla. She hung her arms over his legs and laid her head in his lap. He wondered how often they had been together like this over the past three years. Often when the teams were out, he and Cahla would seek each other, as if in some mutual empathic need, and spend silent hours together. Or, sometimes, when things were not going well, not so silent hours: he would talk to her at length, tell her his problems, how things were going with the evacuation plans – and she would listen, the expression on her fine, faceted face neutral as she stared off into the jungle.

He often wondered if he really knew the girl who called herself Cahla, or if what he assumed he knew of her, the girl's likes and dislikes, reactions and mannerisms, were nothing more than a collection of details seen through positively prejudiced eyes. She was young, she was beautiful, and she looked so much as he imagined his daughter might have looked now, had she still been alive.

Absently he stroked her long hair. The sun was a perfect circle high above the horizon. In the five years since his posting to Tartarus, the sun had swollen to twice its former size, and the activity upon its bloody surface had increased. He often spent hours staring, fascinated, at the haemoglobin rush of sunspots across the swollen disc.

Cahla said, "Is missing, McKenzie? Worried, you?"

He laid a hand across the top of her head like some benign phrenologist. "McKenzie and Patel. I tried to radio them – no reply." He forever found himself mincing his grammar when talking to Cahla.

"Tallmam, darkman, funnyman, McKenzie?"

Jenner smiled to himself, smoothing her hair. "Yes, all those things. I feel responsible, Cahla."

A hesitation. "Responsible?"

"It means... because of me they went out this time, because of me they are missing."

There was no response from the tamed jungle girl. He wondered if she understood.

Discounting the malfunction of both their radios, and the possibility that their flier had crashed, he wondered what else might have happened to McKenzie and Patel. They had never had any trouble with the tribespeople before. That left only the possibility of wild animals, the jaguar-analogues and ferocious primates that dwelled in the jungle. But both team members were well armed and knew how to look after themselves.

"I feel bad," Jenner said to himself. "Irrational as it is, that's how I feel."

Six months ago Director Magnusson, head of the evacuation programme based in Baudelaire, had contacted Jenner. He'd taken the call in the operations room, Cahla crouching by his chair and staring wide-eyed at the swollen image of the Director on the wall-screen.

"Regarding the Ey'an," Magnusson said, glancing up from a computer read-out, "I've been assessing your report and we've come to a decision."

Jenner had nodded, uncomfortable. He had petitioned the Director for more time in which to win the trust of the Ey'an.

"We've decided to go ahead with the 'gift to the natives' option," the Director said, holding up one of the seemingly innocuous oddments. "Time is of the essence. I'll send down a consignment of knives, pots and pans for distribution among the Ey'an. Each item will contain a radio transmitter. When the time comes, we'll use them to locate and round up the tribe – utilizing force if necessary. Any objections?"

Jenner had a few, but the Director had heard them all before. He had asked a couple of routine questions before Magnusson cut the connection. Sensing his unease, Cahla looked up at him with concern.

When the crate of gee-gaws had arrived, Jenner sent McKenzie and Patel to Ey'an territory to hand out the gifts.

Four days ago he suggested that they return to monitor the success of the distribution. It should have been a routine field-trip; there was no way he could have foreseen the present situation. He told himself that he should not feel responsible for what might have happened out there, but that did nothing to ease his nagging guilt.

That afternoon he sat down at the computer in his study and began the monthly report. A couple of hours later, not halfway through listing his teams' progress, he decided to complete the report later. He moved to the communications room and tried again to raise McKenzie and Patel, without success.

At sunset, Cahla found him staring at the wall. She pushed the fly-netting door open with her toes and laid her cheek against the jamb. "Jen, make food I. Hungry you?"

They dined on the back verandah as the sun slipped over the horizon and the evening cooled. Cahla had prepared a salad, and they ate in customary silence, Cahla sitting cross-legged on her chair and picking through her food like a bird. Later she fell into her hammock and swung herself to sleep, a negligent arm and leg hanging free.

Jenner sat and stared into the dark jungle beneath the fulminating sky, contemplating McKenzie and what action he should take. Tomorrow, if there was still no word from his deputy, he would contact Baudelaire and request, as he had done four years ago when Laura went missing, that Magnusson should send out a search party.

The sun was a burning filament on the horizon, giving off slow-motion fountains of molten ejecta, when he left Cahla sleeping peacefully and moved inside.

He sat wearily on his bed before undressing. He picked up the holo-cube from the bedside table and stared at it. His wife smiled out at him – an attractive woman, in her late 30s when the cube was made, with a tanned, lined face and short blonde hair streaked with grey. She had an arm around Rebecca, pulling the little girl to her chest.

Jenner had stared so often and so hard at the image of his daughter that now in his mind's eye, when he thought of Rebecca, he saw only this likeness: a laughing face, fair hair, wide, bright blue eyes... Over the years the pain of grief had muted, from a sharp, insistent agony, to a dull infrequent ache. But the years had also dulled his memory. It was a cruel paradox that now, when at last he could bear to think about his daughter, he had difficulty recalling specific instances of their time together. He could no longer recall the sound of her voice, her laughter.

The death of their daughter, in a monorail accident on Earth seven years ago, had brought Jenner and Laura closer together. They had been approaching the end of their marriage contract, and in all likelihood might never have renewed it but for their loss. They had discovered more about each other in the hollow year that followed the accident than they had in the previous five. Jenner had found a strength and resolve deep within Laura that made the thought of being without her – of going through the process of finding someone else, and trying to get to know them just as well – impossible to contemplate, and clearly Laura had undergone a similar re-evaluation. When Jenner suggested, tentatively, afraid of being spurned, that perhaps they should take out another contract, she had agreed without hesitation.

Two years later Jenner was posted to Tartarus to work on the evacuation programme, and Laura had requested a grant from a Terran university to study the planet's tribal people.

They had lived together at the Station for a year, Laura going off on field-trips into the interior for weeks at a time, sometimes accompanied by students, but often alone. Their marriage settled into a comfortable, amicable relationship, no longer passionate, but full of trust and understanding. Their only difference of opinion concerned the fate of the tribespeople. Through her contact with the many tribes, Laura had come to sympathize with their desire to die with their planet, a desire Jenner admitted he could understand, but could hardly accede to... Their infrequent arguments centred on the fate of the tribes: Laura had argued that as an intelligent people they should be granted their wish to

remain when the nova blew; Jenner that they were a primitive people who should not be allowed to commit collective suicide because of belief in pagan gods and a desire to be reunited with their ancestors.

Of the two, Laura had been by far the most ambitious. Jenner was quite happy to sit back and let things happen, perhaps the consequence of a cynicism or despair which informed him of the futility of wanting anything other than that which he possessed already. Laura, on the other hand, was driven, forever questing and painfully curious. Jenner had wanted another child, and he had raised the subject with Laura more than once, but she had always claimed that she was too busy with her work to contemplate the commitment.

On the morning of her disappearance, Laura had taken a power-boat for a three-week trip up-river with the intention of filming a local tribe. They had kept in radio contact for a day, and then she had failed to answer his call. He had not been unduly worried at the time. Laura knew the jungle well, knew how to look after herself. But as the next day passed without word from her, and then the next, his earlier confidence evaporated, turned to alarm. On the fourth day he called Baudelaire and, later, accompanied the search team on a sweep of the route she had taken. They had found nothing, no wreckage, no personal possessions, no trace of his wife's passage up-river. Jenner had contacted all the tribespeople in the area, but they had come across no sign of his wife. After a fortnight the search was called off, and the sudden inaction pitched Jenner into despair.

As the weeks turned into months, and then, incredibly, into years, he lived day by day with the thought always at the back of his mind that *today* she would return, and, if not today, then certainly tomorrow. Like this, bit by bit, he managed to survive. Over the past year he had even come to consider what before would have been unthinkable – how Laura might have met her end: an accident on the river, a wild animal attack, illness... He only hoped that, however she had died, it had been swift and painless.

He replaced the holo-cube on the bedside table, swallowed a couple of sleeping pills, and passed a dreamless night.

The following morning Jenner was in the communications room, having once again failed to reach McKenzie and Patel, when Cahla burst in. The screen door smashed against the wall and shivered in its flimsy frame. She stood in the opening, eyes wide. "Jen! Come, now. Come!"

"What's wrong, Cahla?" He had rarely seen her this animated.

She leaned forward, balling her fists and banging the air in frustration. "Come now! Out there – person!"

She grabbed his hand and tugged him from his chair.

They crossed the verandah and went down the steps, then halted in the compound. Jenner grimaced as the sunlight pounded his bare head. Silently, with a peculiarly alert stance and minute movements of her head, Cahla scrutinized the perimeter fence on three sides.

He put a hand around her shoulders. "I don't see anyone."

"Here, was! Man!"

"Who? A team worker? McKenzie?"

"Nai – tribesman."

At that second, Jenner saw him. Evidently, so did Cahla. Her body stiffened beneath his arm. She pointed. "There!"

The tribesman was jogging around the compound, inside the perimeter fence. From time to time he dropped to one knee, sketched something in the dust with his finger, then continued running.

"What's he doing, Cahla?"

"Jungle spirits follow him," she said. "Do *karahai*, he."

"What does he want?"

Cahla twisted her lips to one side of her face, admitting puzzlement.

Never in his tour of duty here had a tribesman come to him – always it had been the other way around. He realized that he was sweating. He pulled a bandanna from his pocket and mopped his face.

The tribesman disappeared around the rear of the compound, and minutes later reappeared and jogged to the spot where Jenner had first seen him. Then he stopped, turned and faced them. For a couple of seconds he stood still, very upright, something proud and indomitable, almost arrogant, in his bearing.

Then he walked with measured paces across the compound.

He was tall and slim, tanned and blonde. He wore a loin-cloth and body-paint, green stripes covering his torso and arms. In a diagonal from shoulder to hip was slung a thong of leather, holding a dozen darts like a primitive bandoleer. In his left hand he carried a long blow-pipe.

Watching him, Jenner could not dispel the sense of incongruity at beholding a Caucasian in such a guise.

The tribesman stopped before them. His expression was neutral but bold, reminding Jenner of Cahla. Oddly, he felt suddenly possessive of the girl, and he tightened his grip around her shoulders.

He held out his free hand. "Welcome to the station."

Cahla spoke in her own tongue, translating. The guttural sound seemed strange coming from lips he had heard speaking only fractured English.

The tribesman replied. "*Dhaykum arkim, karan ee.*"

Cahla glanced up at Jenner. "Tribesman, say he, honoured he. Be here pleased he."

"Can you ask him where he comes from? What he wants here?"

Cahla stared at the tribesman, repeating the questions. The tribesman shifted his gaze from the girl to Jenner, then back again. He nodded, tipping his head quickly upwards.

His reply was a rapid stream of incomprehensible plo-sives. Jenner assumed an expression of polite attention. In the full glare of the sun, he was beginning to wilt.

When the tribesman paused, Cahla said, "Far away from. Ey'an he. With you talk he. His name – Makhabi."

Jenner took hold of Cahla's chin. "Ey'an he? Are you sure?"

She gave a restricted nod. "Yay, Ey'an he."

He felt suddenly dizzy with a combination of the intense heat and the unprecedented situation.

"Will you tell Makhabi to come into the shade?" he said, gesturing towards the verandah.

Reluctantly, it seemed, the tribesman agreed. He followed Jenner and Cahla up the steps. The transition from sunlight to shade was as refreshing as entering a pool of cool water. They sat in a triangle, cross-legged, on the rush matting.

"Will you tell Makhabi that two of my workers visited the Ey'an people three days ago. Did he see them? Do his people know what happened to my friends?"

Cahla repeated the questions. Makhabi spoke quickly, perhaps dismissively.

Jenner nodded as Cahla translated the replies. Again, Makhabi assumed ignorance. He knew nothing. "Ask him what he wishes to discuss with me, what he wants to talk to me about."

This question, when relayed, provoked a torrent of words from Makhabi. Cahla nodded at intervals, taking in his speech. At last the tribesman stopped, and the girl licked her lips, looking at Jenner from beneath her fringe.

"Say he, with him go you. Land of Ey'an people. Will be safe you. Danger no."

"What do his people want with me?"

Cahla nodded. "*Kancha ki*, leader Ey'an people – with you talk. Ey'an people and dying sun about."

Jenner released a breath, staring into the tribesman's green eyes. He decided that there was no reason why he could not leave the station – it was the perfect opportunity not only to look into what had happened to McKenzie and Patel, but to speak face to face with the leader of the Ey'an people, an honour never before accorded to his team.

"Very well, Cahla. Tell him, yes. I'll go. I'll ready a flier and we'll set off in... say one hour."

Cahla turned to the tribesman, repeated Jenner's answer. Makhabi stared at Jenner, made a quick karate chop on the floor between them.

Cahla flinched.

"What now?"

"Say he, flier no! Flier evil. Up river in his boat go."

"Very well. But we'll take my boat. Is that okay?"

Makhabi listened to Cahla, reluctantly nodded.

"I need to collect some things, food and water, a tent." He hesitated, looked at Cahla. "Will you come with me, to translate?"

On the few occasions that Jenner had seen the river from the air, it had appeared as a sluggish, serpentine series of loops and bends, the only interruption in the jungle which extended to the horizon in every direction. Seen from the boat, its speed reduced to running pace by rafts of algae, the river was a claustrophobic avenue flanked by overhanging trees and often covered completely, a twilight tunnel in which everything, the heat, the animal cries, the very oppressiveness of this environment, was emphasized. From the air, the alienness of the jungle could be ignored – it might have been any tropical jungle, anywhere – but steering the

boat up-river, passing grotesquely torsioned plants and trees, Jenner could be in no doubt that he was on an alien world a hundred light years from Earth.

Makhabi sat on the very prow of the boat, blow-pipe raised, his torso as erect as some primitive figurehead. Jenner was at the stern, attending to the tiller. Between them sat Cahla, facing Jenner, her long legs outstretched. The tribesman's boat was tethered to the stern with a length of plastic rope. Before setting off, Jenner had erected a sun-reflective awning over the back of the boat: they were spared the full force of the sun, though nothing could be done to reduce the heat, and the humid air was as unbreathable as steam.

He glanced at his watch. They had been travelling for half a day. It was still a couple of hours from sunset. Ahead, the disc of the sun could be glimpsed down the channel of encroaching jungle. Tongues of flame licked from its circumference, and Jenner thought that it resembled those quaint illustrations of Earth's own sun, drawn by ancient astronomers.

From time to time, great flying insects flickered from nowhere and alighted on the boat as if curious. Sometimes Cahla would put her face close to the magnificent, multi-coloured creatures, admiring their beauty. Occasionally she flicked away the insects, her sour expression suggesting they were poisonous. Once she quickly plucked an insect between thumb and forefinger, pulled off its wings, removed its head and popped the resulting delicacy into her mouth.

Jenner sat back and watched the girl who over the course of the past three years he had come to love.

He often thought back to the day she arrived at the Station.

It had been almost a year after Laura's disappearance, a year in which Jenner had become ever more withdrawn, unable to open up to those members of his team he had formerly considered his closest colleagues: Bob McKenzie, Chang and one or two others. He had been torn by the desire to leave the Station and Tartarus altogether, remove himself from the cause of his pain, and yet at the same time to remain there in the ludicrous hope that one day Laura might return.

Then one morning Martin Chang came running across the compound and into the operations room, with news of the discovery. Jenner and a medic had followed him, leaving the compound and entering the margin of cleared jungle between the Station and the river. They had hurried down the timber walkway to where a tribal canoe was lodged in a tangle of reeds at the river's edge.

The sight of the little girl lying in the canoe had taken Jenner's breath away. Her resemblance to Rebecca was remarkable; the same fair hair, oval face, slightness of limbs. But perhaps what affected Jenner even more was that, laid out in the narrow confines of the canoe, she brought back memories of the very last time he had looked upon his daughter, at rest in her coffin on the day before the funeral.

He had left Chang and the medic to revive her, returned to his work, and tried to put the girl from his thoughts. She was taken to the infirmary, washed and examined and pronounced fit and well. Jenner heard

from Chang that most probably the girl – Cahla, she called herself – had been fishing in the boat, had fainted and drifted downstream.

Jenner resolved to take no interest in the girl. He would detail one of his team to take her out on the next field-trip and reunite her with her tribe.

Then, one night, the cumulative loss of his wife and his daughter became too much, and had to be quelled in some fashion, with drink or drugs, or human contact. He crossed the compound to the infirmary, slipped inside and sat by Cahla's bed, staring at her as she slept.

In the days that followed he had shied away from becoming involved with Cahla. She would be leaving soon, returning to her people, and to allow himself to get close to her would be folly. But the tribes approached by Chang claimed no knowledge of Cahla, and as the weeks turned to months, and Jenner found himself becoming involuntarily drawn to the girl, he ordered off the search for her people, claiming that his teams had better things to do. Not a day passed without his spending an hour or two in her company. He taught her to speak English, played simple games with her, showed her around the Station. Her savagery, her elemental nature, seemed at odds with the restricted environment of the Station, and yet she never made any move or request to leave. After a year with Cahla around the place, it came to Jenner with a sudden heart-stopping jolt of realization that he could no longer contemplate life without her. She had ceased to be a replacement, a substitute for his daughter, but had become an individual in her own right, a person with her own characteristics, moods and temperaments. He decided that, when he left Tartarus, Cahla would leave with him.

And what cheered Jenner was that Cahla had taken to him; not with any demonstrative show of affection or emotion – hugs and kisses were not part of the way of life of the tribal peoples – but in her own, calm, neutral way, the way she followed him, watched him through her fringe, was always by his side when he talked to his team in the briefing room.

The first time she disappeared, Jenner thought that she had finally had enough of this strange new life, had decided to return to her true existence in the jungle, and despite the intellectual realization that this was for the best, he still could not help mourning his loss.

Then, three days later, Cahla returned, the waist-thong of her loin-cloth hung with a dozen frogs, a furry monkey-like creature slung over her shoulder like a backpack. She carried a blow-pipe, fashioned from a bamboo-analogue, clutched in her small fist.

From time to time she would disappear like this, be gone two or three days, or sometimes longer, and then reappear – and Jenner's guilt that he had perverted the course of her life was assuaged by the evidence that she could still function in her own environment.

The sun had set, but the sky still glowed with flickers and pulses of orange light. Makhabi gestured that they should pull into the shore for the night. They made camp on a broad curve of sand. Makhabi moored the boat to the trees while Jenner erected the dome-tent and Cahla

broke out the rations. They ate in silence, seated outside the dome, Jenner drinking water to replace the fluid lost during the day. When it came to the sleeping arrangements, Makhabi insisted on remaining outside, sitting cross-legged with his blow-pipe at the ready. Jenner shared the dome with Cahla, opaqued the membrane against the flickering night, and soon fell asleep.

He was disturbed only once during the night, and even then he was only half-awoken. He heard some small sound within the dome, and realized that it was Cahla, nestling close to him. She was crying quietly, inexplicably. Jenner put an arm around her, and after a while she ceased her sobbing and slept.

They set off before sunrise in the morning, the steady throb of the engine the only sound in the pre-dawn stillness. Cahla seemed her normal self, and Jenner refrained from questioning her about her sadness of the night before.

For the next few miles the river was entirely overgrown with a verdant mat of vegetation. They proceeded down a long, twilight tunnel in which the territorial cries of birds and beasts echoed eerily. Makhabi seemed all the more alert today. He sat bolt upright with his blow-pipe raised to his lips.

Cahla explained in a whisper, "Here, bad *haranga* from trees drop. Quickly kill us, eat. Careful. Careful must be."

At last they emerged from the covered stretch of river, the daylight blindingly bright to eyes grown accustomed to the aqueous half-light. For the next few hours they made good speed along a winding length of river free from algae and weeds. Around noon, after a light meal, Cahla offered to take over at the tiller. They exchanged positions, and Jenner made himself as comfortable as possible in the bottom of the boat, and dozed.

He was awoken by Cahla some time later. "Jen, Jen. Now wake up."

They were no longer moving; the engine was silent. Jenner sat up, working the aches from his back. "Have we arrived?"

"Nai," Cahla said. "Now long walk."

He stepped onto the bank of the river and between them they ferried the provisions ashore. Makhabi unfastened his own boat, and tied both craft to the bole of a tree. Then he spoke to Cahla.

She translated, "Four, five hour walk, say he."

They divided the canisters of water between them and set off into the jungle along a well-worn path, Makhabi leading the way and Cahla bringing up the rear. They halted repeatedly to allow Jenner to rest and take water. Already his shirt was rank with sweat, and he was feeling light-headed. After three hours he exchanged positions with Cahla and watched the girl negotiate the uneven surface of the jungle floor with swift-footed ease, effortlessly at home in this hostile environment.

They came upon the encampment of the Ey'an people without warning. One moment they were striding through the jungle, identical to every other stretch they had traversed, and then they were on the edge of a vast clearing, the absence of trees allowing the sunlight to fall

en bloc – so that for the first few seconds the details of the camp were lost in a blinding dazzle. Jenner shielded his eyes, made out a series of small, conical huts flanking the clearing; at the far end was a long communal hut raised above the ground on stilts.

Only then did Jenner notice the people. They stood about in one and twos; men, women and naked children, all tall, tanned and fair, the males of the tribe daubed with verdant stripes like Makhabi's. They had ceased what they had been doing to turn and stare at the sudden appearance of Jenner and his companions, and he felt uncomfortable under the weight of their collective attention.

Then he saw something which increased his pulse and sent a prickling sensation across his scalp.

Across the clearing stood McKenzie's flier, its bulbous glass fuselage reflecting the sunlight, rotors drooping.

Before he could react, gather his thoughts and question Makhabi, a welcoming committee of three Ey'an people, two old men and a woman, approached from the communal hut and crossed the clearing. From somewhere, more tribespeople emerged. They stood on the periphery of the clearing, a packed gallery of silent spectators.

The three elders paused before Jenner.

Their expressions were unsmiling, which in itself was not unusual. Even so, Jenner thought he detected an air of hostility in their manner.

"Jenner?" the old woman said. "Come. Follow."

Before the three turned, Jenner asked, "McKenzie and Patel? Where are they?"

"Later. Now, come."

Only then did he wonder how the woman had come to learn English. He looked around for Cahla, as much to see a friendly face as for some explanation, but in his trepidation he could not make her out among the other tribespeople.

He followed the three elders across the clearing, aware of a thousand pairs of eyes monitoring his progress. He arrived at the communal hut and followed the elders up a flimsy ladder lashed together from saplings.

The interior of the hut was dim. From the entrance he was unable to see more than a few metres before him. He could, however, make out the rattan walls on either side, and two rows of silent, seated Ey'an people. The elders proceeded slowly, with a certain ceremony, down the aisle formed by the tribespeople. Someone at his side – he saw that it was Makhabi – touched his arm in a gesture for him to follow.

As he walked, the far end of the hut resolved itself. Two figures were seated in front of him, cross-legged. The elders joined the seated figures, so that now a phalanx of five Ey'an people confronted him. Makhabi gestured for him to sit down. Stiffly, tired after the trek through the jungle, Jenner lowered himself to the floor.

Later he would look back in amazement at how the human mind could absorb so much shock and still continue to function. He was surprised at how calm he was, then, when he looked up and saw his wife.

"Laura...?"

It was Laura – four years older, thinner, totally grey-haired now, but Laura still. She was not smiling, but

Jenner told himself that her expression softened as she looked upon his confusion.

"Jen, welcome to the Ey'an-heth, the wise council of the Ey'an."

She was naked but for a loin-cloth, and her tanned torso was painted with green slashes. The shock was making him dizzy. "Laura?"

"I've been rehearsing this meeting for a long time, Jen," she said softly, "dreading the inevitable and knowing that it was necessary for both of us. Listen to me and try to understand. I know you will feel anger, resentment – those feelings are natural – but try to control them, understand what I have to tell you."

Jenner cradled his head in his hands. "I don't think I can understand anything now. None of this makes any sense."

"Please, listen to me. Four years ago I left you and the Station and found... I found what for years I had been looking for, without really understanding that I had been looking for anything. It happens like that – you know what you have been seeking only when you find it. And I found it among the Ey'an people."

It was all he could do to stare at her.

"Ever since... what happened to Rebecca, I was dissatisfied with what I had, with what I could attain from the life I was leading."

"I meant that little to you!"

"It was nothing to do with you. It was just... I needed another life. A life of simplicity and certainty, a life close to the earth."

Jenner interrupted, "You can't be happy here, among these people... You're an intelligent woman."

"And I thought you were an intelligent man, Jen. I thought you might possibly have understood that even a so-called unsophisticated people can be wise and compassionate."

As she spoke, Jenner recognized the Laura of old, the Laura he had loved – and he wanted to reach out and take her in his arms, and in so doing erase the misery of his loss.

She was speaking. "I wanted to tell you all this, Jen – but it was not the reason I asked you here." She paused, looked around at the elders. They gestured, inclined their heads.

She continued, "The Ey'an people want you to know that they are happy here and wish to remain on Tartarus until the very end, that they do not wish to undergo the evacuation you are here to oversee. The Ey'an worship the power and the inevitability of the nova, and will seek its salvation when the great day comes. In the aftermath of the firestorm, we will be reunited with our ancestors, and the ones we have loved and lost –"

He stared at her. Slowly, understanding came to him. "You believe that by staying here, Rebecca will be returned to you?"

Her gaze was unremitting. "It is what my people believe. They crave reunion with their ancestors, who have become Gods. Don't you see that to remove these people from here, from their very roots, would destroy them?"

He gestured feebly. "Laura... it's my duty to ensure

the complete evacuation of all tribal peoples from this continent. I..."

"Let me warn you," Laura said, strength in her tone, "that we do not intend to leave Tartarus." She called out something in an alien tongue, and there was activity behind the seated elders.

"This will serve as a warning," she said, and the brutality of her tone sent a shiver of foreboding through Jenner. "We had to make a stand, a gesture of our intent. I suggest that you take heed."

As she spoke, four Ey'an people carried two crude stretchers from the shadows, and laid them between the elders and Jenner.

He could only stare. He felt something freeze within him as he looked upon the contorted bodies of McKenzie and Patel, at the long darts protruding from their chests. The shadows within the hut concealed their faces, and for this he was thankful.

"How could you...?" he cried.

"If it will persuade you of the wishes of the Ey'an people, then their sacrifice will have been worthwhile. It was the only way we had of demonstrating that we have the means to resist all your efforts to remove us. If you come for us in future, we will be ready."

"You don't know what evil you've committed, in the name of your so called freedom," he said. "Not only the deaths of McKenzie and Patel, but the genocide of the Ey'an, the extinction of all future generations."

He climbed to his feet, sick with the heat and the turn of events. "If you think you've heard the end of this —" he began.

Laura stood and faced him. "Is that a threat? Do you mean that you will return with reinforcements, after tracing us with your trinkets?"

He stared down at her. "How...?" he began.

He was aware of the eyes of the Ey'an people, laughing at his bewilderment.

"You tortured —" he said, gesturing towards the bodies. Before putting his friends to death, had they tortured them to extract the information about the gifts?

"We tortured no one. They died swiftly and without pain."

"Then how...?"

"I thought you might resort to trickery to effect our evacuation. We fought like with like. We had to know what you were planning."

"I don't understand," he said, his heart thumping with sudden dread.

"We had to have someone in the Station itself," Laura said.

Her words filled him with disbelief. "Cahla?" he whispered.

"We had to do it," she said, unsmiling. "It was the only way."

"How..." he managed, "how could you be so..."

"We had to save our people. All else does not matter."

Jenner cried openly. "She's coming back with me! You can't take her —!"

"Jen," Laura said, something approaching tenderness in her tone, "please go now. Cahla is one of us, and always will be."

"No!" He wanted to argue, wanted to hit out at her, and at the same time wanted only to be far away from the woman who had once been his wife.

Makhabi gripped his upper arm and escorted him from the hut and into the clearing. He shook himself free from the tribesman's grip, calling Cahla's name and dashing like a madman among the Ey'an. Makhabi caught him with ease, strong arms restricting his movement. A thousand pairs of eyes watched him as he stumbled towards the jungle path. He stared into every face; if only Cahla could see him now, witness the straits into which she'd cast him, then surely she would return with him... He wanted to find her, tell her that he forgave her for what she had done, that he understood; he wanted to ask her if her affection had been genuine, or nothing more than an act.

But, though he often thought he saw her among the myriad Ey'an faces, he could not be certain.

He stopped defiantly at the edge of the clearing, looked back in an attempt to make out the girl, if only to retain in his mind's eye a last picture of her to carry with him from the planet. The only face he recognized was his wife's: Laura was standing beside the ladder of the communal hut, staring at him across the clearing.

Then Makhabi took his arm and forced him into the jungle.

He recalled nothing later of the long walk to the river, escorted all the way by the tribesman — only the eventual sight of the sluggish river and the ball of the setting sun. He climbed aboard his boat and started the engine. As he moved slowly away from the bank without a backward glance, his speed impeded by the surface weeds, he was overcome by the weight of a terrible depression at the thought of the fate to which his wife had consigned herself, Cahla, and the Ey'an people.

He sat at the tiller and wept.

Jenner had no idea how long had elapsed when he heard a cry from the bank of the river. He looked up, but could make out nothing. Then the cry came again — animal in its urgency.

Something appeared from the foliage on the river bank and shot into the water like a spear. She did not emerge until the parabola of her dive brought her up beside the boat. She gripped the gunwale and pulled, so that the boat rocked and her streaming head showed above the side. Her bright eyes stared him through the wet strands of her fringe, her watchful expression caught between fear and entreaty.

His heart swelling with an emotion he found hard to contain, Jenner reached out and pulled Cahla aboard. Then, his arm around the quietly crying girl, he gunned the engine and steered the boat downstream, towards the Station and salvation.

Eric Brown, born 1960, is the author of many sf books, including *The Time-Lapsed Man* (1990), *Meridian Days* (1992), *Engineman* (1994), *Blue Shifting* (1996) and *Penumbra* (1999). We published his first story in 1987, and his more recent contributions here include "Vulphurous" (#129), "Onward Station" (#135), "Hunting the Slarque" (#141) and "The Flight of the Oh Carrollian" (with Keith Brooke, #145). He lives in Haworth, West Yorkshire.

James White

AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Graham Andrews

The best monument to Northern-Irish sf writer James White (7th April 1928 – 23rd August 1999) is on all our bookshelves. Here is a lightly-annotated chronological listing of his novels and collections.

The Secret Visitors (Ace, 1957: doubled with *Master of Life and Death* by Robert Silverberg)

Novel. Magazine version: *New Worlds*, 3 parts, October-December 1956, as "Tourist Planet." Exceptional first novel that still leaves a good taste in the mind. "They put our world on trial!" (blurb). Flying saucers landing at Port Ballintrae, in Co. Antrim, Northern Ireland? Perhaps it should be reprinted as *The XXX Files*.

Hospital Station (Ballantine, 1962)

Collection (outstanding stories marked*): "Medic" (formerly "O'Mara's Orphan")*; "Sector General" (first in series: *New Worlds*, November 1957); "Trouble with Emily"*; "Visitor at Large"*; "Out-Patient." Sector General, Book the First. (Sector Twelve General Hospital is a Big Smart Object situated far out on the galactic Rim – as if you didn't know.) Anon's cover painting makes the ultimate polyclinic look like a mutated wedding cake. Sidebar: "Ballantine Books is proud and happy to present James White, already much admired in England, to what, we have no doubt, will be an equally delighted American audience" (blurb). Bit of a cheek, really, considering that Jim had previously published "The Scavengers" (*Astounding*, October 1953) and *The Secret Visitors* (see above) in the good old U.S. of A.

Second Ending (Ace, 1962: doubled with *The Jewels of Apor* by Samuel R. Delany)

Novel. Magazine version: *Fantastic*, 2 parts, June-July 1961). "I wanted to write a story about the last man on

Earth and not just on Earth but the very last representative of the race of Man, which had an upbeat ending." *Second Ending* was short-listed for a Hugo, but something called



Stranger in a Strange Land won the award instead.

Star Surgeon (Ballantine, 1963)

Fix-up novel: "Resident Physician" (*New Worlds*, September 1961) and "Field Hospital" (*New Worlds*, 3 parts, January-March 1962). Sector General, 2. Cover artist Richard Powers did his usual surrealistic best on Sector General. Not to be confused with Alan E. Nourse's juvenile novel of the same title (McKay, 1960).

Deadly Litter (Ballantine, 1964)

Collection (outstanding stories marked*): "Grapeliner"*; "The Ideal Captain"; "The Lights Outside the Windows"; "Deadly Litter."*

Open Prison (Four Square, 1965)

Novel. Magazine version in *New Worlds*, 3 parts, February-April 1964. What might have been *The Great Escape* rewritten by Eric Frank Russell turns out to be more than just another space-war epic. The Bugs dump human POWs on a bleak planet, without tools or weapons to defend themselves against native predators. American title: *The Escape Orbit* (Ace, same year).

The Watch Below (Ballantine, 1966)

Novel. In the first subplot, a Second World War British tanker is torpedoed and sunk – but not all the way down. Some few people survive and even thrive in a huge air-pocket, knocking together their own life-support system. Much later, aquatic aliens from a dead planet splash down in the Atlantic and help free their unfortunate counterparts. Before *The Poseidon Adventure*/*Sphere*/*The Abyss*/*Cradle* there was... *The Watch Below* (potential blurb).

All Judgment Fled (Rapp & Whiting, 1968)

Novel. Winner of the 1979 Europa Prize. Six Earthmen board a huge alien spacecraft passing through the Solar System. They must decide which of its multi-alien crew/passengers are sentient enough for meaningful communication. "The situation develops remorselessly and with an authenticity of detail that seems to belie the fictional basis..." (*Books and Bookmen*). For the ending alone, it knocks *Rendezvous with Rama* into a cocked space helmet.

The Aliens Among Us (Ballantine, 1969)

Collection (outstanding stories marked*): "Countercharm"*; "To Kill

or Cure"*; "Red Alert"; "Tableau"*; "The Conspirators"*; "The Scavengers"*; "Occupation: Warrior."

Major Operation (Ballantine, 1971)

Fix-up novel (all from John Carnell's *New Writings in SF* book-magazine): "Invader" (1966); "Vertigo" (1968); "Blood Brother" (1969); "Meatball" (1969); "Major Operation" (1971). Sector General, 3. Reads like an A. E. van Vogt novel that makes perfect sense – if you can imagine such a thing.

Tomorrow is Too Far (Ballantine, 1971)

Novel. "Perhaps mankind's time space is as limited as his living space..." (blurb). This deep-think mystery novel considers the possible psychological as well as the physical effects of time/space travel, with particular reference to psychobiological time paradoxes. Its set in a large aerospace company, Hart-Ewing, not unlike Belfast planemakers Short Brothers, Ltd., where White was working at the time.

Lifeboat (Ballantine, 1972)

Novel. Magazine version in *Galaxy*, 2 parts, January and March 1972, as "Dark Inferno." "The passengers were the usual varied lot, some nervous, some boisterous, some smart-aleck, some quiet... It was a routine trip. And so was the safety drill. Until the disaster call went out..." (blurb). Revised British edition (Michael Joseph, same year) as *Dark Inferno*.

The Dream Millennium (Ballantine, 1974)

Novel. Magazine version in *Galaxy*, 3 parts, October-December 1973. White's inner-space take on Heinlein's *Orphans of the Sky* sub-genre. John Devlin, M.D. intermittently escorts cryonic colonists fleeing the hellbound Earth in a slowcoach starship. While in coldsleep mode, he dreams no, nightmares – the entire history of humanity via the Jungian race memory. The recent Ulster Troubles rate a dishonourable mention.

Monsters and Medics (Ballantine, 1977)

Collection (outstanding stories marked*): Introduction: "Reality in Science Fiction"; *Second Ending* (see above); "Counter Security"*; "Dogfight"*; "Nuisance Value"; "In Loving Memory"; "The Apprentice"*; "Answer Came There None." British edition (Corgi, same year) omits the last two stories.

Ambulance Ship (Ballantine, 1979)

Fix-up novel (all original): "Contagion"; "Quarantine"; "Recovery." Introduction: "The Secret History of Sector General" (*FOKT* no. 3, 1978). British edition (Corgi, 1980) adds "Spacebird" (*New Writings in SF* 22, 1973). Sector General, 4.

Underkill (Corgi, 1979)

Novel. A sideways sequel to *The Dream Millennium* (see above), describing the Belfast-writ-large Earth left behind by the colonists. Dr Malcolm and his wife, Ann, find out that aliens are killing off most of humanity for the general good. This Swifter than Swift modest proposal led Ballantine and several other American publishers to reject *Underkill* because it was not a "real" James White novel. The more fool them.

Futures Past (Ballantine, 1982)

Grab-bag collection (outstanding stories marked*): "Spacebird"*; "Commuter"*; "Assisted Passage" (Jim's first sale: *New Worlds*, January 1953); "Curtain Call"*; "Boarding Party"; "Patrol"; "Fast Trip"*; "Question of Cruelty"; "False Alarm"*; "Dynasty of One" (later retitled "Long Will Live the King"); "Outrider." British edition (Orbit, 1988) omits "Spacebird" and adds "Custom Fitting" (Hugo nominee: *Stellar* 2, 1976).*

Sector General (Ballantine, 1983)

Collection (outstanding stories marked*): "Accident"*; "Survivor"; "Investigation"; "Combined Operation."* Sector General, 5. "Accident" is the Sector General origin story, as they say in all the best comic books.

The Interpreters (Birmingham SF Group, 1985: doubled with *A Novacon Garland* by David Langford)

Novacon 15 freebie booklet; limited edition of 600 copies. "Baby Talk" would have been a better title. It was reprinted in *F&SF*, March 1987. The Langford collection has a Sector General parody entitled "Outbreak" (medical pun intended).

Star Healer (Ballantine, 1985)

Novel. Sector General, 6. This title makes me think about somebody who goes around picking sunspots. But that's my problem, not yours.

Code Blue-Emergency (Ballantine, 1987)

Novel. Sector General, 7. Introducing Cha Thrat, Sector General's answer to Xena – Warrior Princess and Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman.

Federation World (Ballantine, 1988)

Fix-up novel (all from *Analog*): "Federation World" (August 1980); "The Scourge" (January 1982); "Something of Value" (February 1985). "As new planets and species were discovered and assessed, the deserving of their populations were invited to move *en masse* to the Federation World, a modified Dyson Sphere in the galactic core" (blurb).

The Silent Stars Go By (Ballantine, 1991)

Novel. "From the project's inception it had been realized that Aisling Gheal, the Bright Vision, would have to be Earth's first star ship rather than the exclusive property of the Hibernian Empire (p12). We're in the Celtic Twilight Zone, here; a parallel universe that is more like *Riverdance* than *Pavane*. White's *magnum opus*, not least by page count (441pp), the best companion piece I've found for it is a half bottle of Black Bush.

The Genocidal Healer (Ballantine, 1992)

Novel. Sector General, 8. Trainee psychologist (later Padre) Lioren must

deal with terminal illness, euthanasia, and honest mistakes than can cause patients harm. Sector General the Best, in my opinion.

The Galactic Gourmet (Tor, 1996)

Novel. Sector General, 9. Gurrone-sevas is a conceited *chef de cuisine* who, after many misadventures, becomes the chief dietician for Sector General.

The White Papers edited by Mark Olson and Bruce Pelz (The NESFA Press, 1996)

Collection, published on behalf of L.A.Con III. Introductions by Mike Resnick and Walt Willis. Fiction (all As): "Custom Fitting"; "Commuter"; "House Sitter" (original); "Sanctuary" (*Analog*, December 1988); "Christmas Treason" (*F&SF*, January 1962); "Accident"; "Medic"; "Countercharm"; "Visitor at Large." Fan writing: nine items, notably "The Exorcists of IF" (IF = Irish Fandom). Plus scholarly articles about Sector General. And all that for only \$25!

Final Diagnosis (Tor, 1997)

Novel. Sector General, 10. "A first-

class medical puzzle... with always a twinkle in the author's eye: thoroughly enjoyable" (Kirkus Reviews).

Mind Changer (Tor, 1998)

Novel. Sector General, 11. My preferred title is O'Mara's Book. Chief Psychologist O'Mara runs Sector General like a sometimes benevolent dictator. His job is to shrink heads, not swell them.

Double Contact (Tor, 1999)

Novel. Sector General the Twelfth and Last: I write those words, but my mind and heart find it hard to accept them.

The Best of the Rest. Fiction: "Un-Birthday Boy" (Hugo nominee: *Analog*, February 1996). Non-fiction: "Biologies and Environments" (*The Visual Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, edited by Brian Ash, Pan, 1977). Associational: *James White, Doctor to Aliens: A Working Bibliography* by Phil Stephensen-Payne and Gordon Benson, Jr., 2nd edition (Galactic Central Publications, 1989).

Slán leat, a chara. Goodbye, old friend.

Graham Andrews

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The Biographical Encyclopedia of Science Fiction Film – the work in progress now sprouting in the *Interzone* website that I feel obliged to explain – was my first project inspired by greed. Years ago, at a time when I felt especially impoverished, I resolved to create a book that might interest a major publisher, make its way to bookstores, and earn money for its author. Such a book, I realized immediately, would have to be about science fiction film, not science fiction literature.

This was hardly a stretch, because like everyone else I had long been fascinated by movies and found it easy to discuss them. But *why* are we so fascinated by movies? It has little to do with aesthetically satisfying storytelling, as was apparent after the mind-numbing experience of watching *The Mummy*. How, I wondered, did a movie that is so manifestly awful, so deficient in all aspects of capable filmmaking covered in introductory cinema classes, become so popular?

At first, the movie brought to mind the pyramid-shaped Luxor Hotel in Las Vegas, which features three thrill rides linked by some senseless plot about uncovering ancient superscience in an Egyptian archaeological site and observing its effects on humanity's future. On one ride, like Disneyland's Star Tours, you sat in synchronized moving chairs while a television screen displayed your enclosure's purported flight through a cavern. So, I thought, *The Mummy* might be considered an amusement-park ride without moving chairs. From that perspective, traditional expectations of narrative logic are irrelevant. One can protest that the film's idiot plot rests upon not a single group of idiots but upon generation after generation of idiots; that if ancient Egyptians had actually possessed the magical abilities displayed in the picture, they would now be enjoying their fifth millennium of world domination; that the Israelites were slaves in Egypt a thousand years after the pyramids were built and spoke a language unlike modern Hebrew, so an Egyptian from that era wouldn't recognize Hebrew as "the language of the slaves"; that a resurrected mummy savvy enough to adjust to 20th-century Cairo would figure out that he didn't need to be afraid of a house cat. But this would be like critiquing a roller coaster. ("For what reason does this vehicle slowly climb to a great height, then abruptly veer downward and to the right?")

Then, recognizing that not all popular films recall thrill rides, I hit upon another reason for the appeal of contemporary movies, also suggested by *The Mummy*, that has nothing to do with skilful narrative: movies are fas-

Big Dumb Opticals

FILM CONSIDERED
AS THE
MOTION PYRAMID

Gary Westfahl

cinating because they are *big*. Specifically, they are *monumental*.

The impulse to construct and admire huge monuments is ancient, and Egyptian pyramids were only one early expression of that impulse. Other Mediterranean civilizations constructed less enduring Wonders of the World, remembered now only as evocative names and imaginative drawings. Rome built the Coliseum, China the Great Wall, India the Taj Mahal; Meso-America created its own pyramids, medieval Europe erected cathedrals, Easter Island raised gigantic statues. In the last two centuries, new materials and techniques brought more monumental marvels like the Eiffel Tower, Statue of Liberty, and Golden Gate Bridge. To impress the world and attract spectators, it seemed, you needed something huge and striking; and if you built it, they would come.

In recent decades, though, massive monuments have been less attractive. A sign of changing attitudes came in the 1960s, when the city of St Louis unveiled, with great fanfare, its answer to the Washington Monument and Arc de Triomphe, the Gateway Arch, expressly designed to become a major tourist attraction. It didn't. While older icons like Big Ben and the Empire State Building continued to draw crowds, other massive new projects, like the Space Needle and Sydney Opera House, also did not garner much notice. If there was a fundamental human desire to gaze in awe at bigness, big buildings no longer satisfied it.

Enter Hollywood.

From the beginning, films often aspired to largeness, as demonstrated by epic fossils like *Intolerance* and *Napoleon*. But it was in the 1950s that the American industry, threatened by something very small – television – responded by visibly striving to be Big. Some innovations, like Cinemascope, 3-D, and Cinerama, were efforts to *literally* make films bigger, and in other ways – extreme length, lavish spending, huge sets, all-star casts, and special effects – Hollywood struggled to lure audiences with the sheer, egregious hugeness of its products.

As Nick Lowe suggests, bigness temporarily went out of style in the 1960s, since big films of that era, mostly biblical epics and sentimental musicals, kept bombing. Instead of being bigger than television, Hollywood resolved to be more naked, foul-mouthed, and violent than television. But bigness roared back a decade later in several forms, including the big disaster movie (*Earthquake*, *The Towering Inferno*), big horror movie (*The Exorcist*, *The Omen*), and big science fiction movie (*Star Wars*, *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*). As the films got bigger and bigger, people started paying more and more attention.

After moving to the Los Angeles area in the 1970s, I was amazed by how extensively the local media covered the movie industry: every new film was reported and reviewed, and there was a constant flood of news about planned and forthcoming films. I seemed in a privileged position, close to the centre of film production and privy to insider information. Today, I am privileged no more: thanks to *Entertainment Tonight*, the E Channel, *Premiere* magazine, websites, and countless other resources, people in Montana or Manchester can learn just as much about movies as people in Burbank. Each weekend, all of America watches film openings like the Super Bowl, anxiously waiting to see if *Star of Echoes* can top *The Sixth Sense* in the Friday box-office receipts. During the week, everyone checks out the latest on the on-again, off-again James Cameron-Arnold Schwarzenegger *Terminator 3* project. (News flash: as of last week, it looks to be On again.)

All this attention surely reflects, in part, an understanding that building a modern motion picture is far more difficult and complex than building a pyramid. At first, equipped only with a script or scenario that can be epitomized in a catchy sales pitch ("It's *Godzilla* Meets *The English Patient*!"), an enterprising player with clout essentially must create an entire company devoted exclusively to

making the proposed film; persuade a few "bankable" performers to front the project; attract financial support in the neighbourhood of a hundred million dollars; recruit a small army of talented craftspeople; work out dozens of deals for merchandising, novelizations, promotional tie-ins, world rights, video rights, and television rights; plan the entire film-making process in the manner of Eisenhower preparing for D-Day; and shepherd the film to completion while coping with daily disruptions that threaten to bring the campaign to a dead halt. Films like *Titanic* are precise analogues of the Egyptian pyramids: on the one hand, they represent the collective labours of thousands of diligent workers; on the other hand, they embody the vision of one dominating individual determined to immortalize his personal obsessions.

(This is, by the way, why Warren Beatty is a credible presidential candidate – not because he is an actor, but because he is an experienced *producer*. Anybody who can keep launching and completing film projects under current conditions undoubtedly can effectively manage a large, pre-existing bureaucracy.)

To appreciate movies as the modern equivalents of monuments, remain in the theatre after the film ends, as I do, and watch all the credits. First, you can hear some excellent music through a sound system better than anything available for the home. Second, the credits may provide surprising information: at the end of *The American President*, for example, I stared incredulously at dozens of credits for special effects (not recalling any explosions, spaceships, or monsters in the film) until I realized that all the crowd scenes – the President at the ball, the President addressing Congress – must have been filmed in front of a blue screen. Finally, the endless credits persuasively communicate just how massive an accomplishment you have witnessed; true, a few names don't really belong in the credits (does providing sandwiches for cast and crew really make you a co-creator of the film?), but the vast majority of the people listed are essential to the film's completion. Even a stinker like *Lake Placid*, which invites consideration as a rejected script for the old *Outer Limits* modernized and padded out to pass for a film, culminates with ten minutes of credits, proudly recognizing the thousands of people who conspired to ruin your Saturday afternoon.

So, following the modern blueprint for successful film-making, Stephen Sommers takes his 115 million dollars, hires a few performers and legions of talented technicians, and resurrects an ancient *Mummy*. Its

inadequacies as narrative don't matter; the film is Big, accompanied by trailers and commercials promising a frenzied grandeur, and strategically unveiled a few weeks before the summer's most celebrated pyramid, *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*, is available for viewing, this lesser edifice manages to attract an impressive number of awestruck observers.

I am describing a pattern, not a rule, and occasional "little" films like *The Blair Witch Project*, lacking big stars, big budgets, and big effects, may be unexpected hits. But like *Marty* or *David and Lisa*, such films never start any trends. Hollywood keeps returning to the safest strategy to attract audiences, namely gigantism. So, if *The Blair Witch Project Part Two* gets made for under 20 million dollars, I will be very surprised.

And what does all this have to do with science fiction?

An obvious answer is that the genres of fantasy and science fiction may be particularly well suited for full-scale monumental film-making. Realistic films must spend some time in realistic settings, too familiar to be truly impressive. Non-realistic films can economically construct, with computer graphics, any sort of spectacular world the director may envision. Realistic films may be limited in their extra-cinematic extensions: Cameron couldn't copyright the name "Titanic" and couldn't interest toymakers in selling little *Titanic* boats that would split apart and sink in your very own bathtub. Non-realistic films can be entirely owned by their creators, and stories can be specifically shaped to enhance marketing possibilities – remember George Lucas's animated stuffed animals, the Ewoks? And building and inhabiting your own world may especially appeal to the egomaniac star or director often required to actually get a movie project off the ground: think *Judge Dredd*. Think *The Postman*. Or think (but don't get me started on) *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*.

Still, contemporary films may be best seen as a replacement for, not an expression of, science fiction.

A forthcoming essay by Peter Nicholls, "Big Dumb Objects and Cosmic Enigmas: The Love Affair between Space Fiction and the Transcendental," offers the argument suggested by its title. He finds a characteristic "sense of wonder, the sublime, the transcendent, or the romantic" in science fiction and adds that "one rather mechanical way of creating this effect is for the storyteller to imagine something very, very big and mysterious, like the spaceship *Rama*, or like Larry Niven's *Ringworld*." For the less imaginative, I

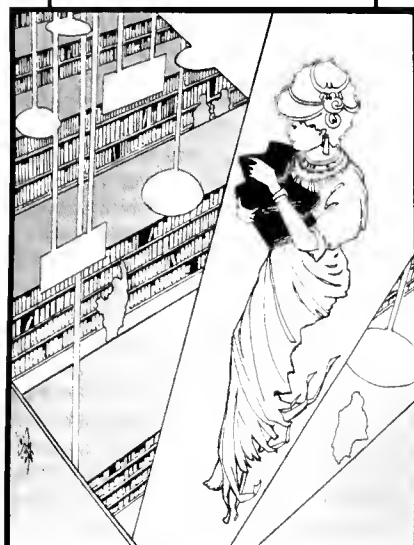
submit, large and distinctive monuments long served to inspire similar emotions; what happened in the 1960s to diminish their impact may have been the newly available photographs of Earth from orbital space. From that cosmic vantage point, we were repeatedly informed, only one human artefact could be seen, the Great Wall of China; even that, it turned out, was undetectable. Suddenly, the monuments of Earth were diminished in stature; if the vaunted Gateway Arch could not be observed from space, was it really important at all?

Now, perhaps, only the artificial and natural wonders of space would suffice to impress the masses, so images of the Saturn V rocket and close-up photographs of the Moon and Mars were proffered to the public. A few films also endeavoured to be conspicuously Big in this respect, most notably *2001: A Space Odyssey*, with depictions of planetary alignments, the spaceship *Discovery*, and the immense monolith orbiting Jupiter. But usually this sort of Bigness proved more alienating than inspiring. Consider that uneasy blend of *2001* and *Star Trek*, *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, a film driven from the start by the studio's insistence upon making it "big." The result was a dull, lifeless epic, with the *Enterprise* crew doing little more than gazing in awe at cosmic immensities. A livelier space film, *Star Wars*, gave viewers touches of such majesty – an opening shot of a huge imperial dreadnought, brilliantly parodied in *Spaceballs* – but otherwise entertained audiences with other sorts of spectacle – exotic aliens, zooming spaceships, big explosions.

Gradually, the films themselves, as well as what they displayed, came to play the role of contemporary monuments, as people grew equally fascinated by the stories behind the screen – the huge budgets, huge egos, huge lawsuits, and so on. And why not? Whether it's pyramids, cathedrals, or films, monuments can always be criticized as criminal wastes of a civilization's resources, particularly when they seem tacky or tasteless. However, people always feel compelled to build them, and it would be churlish to condemn such a characteristic human activity. We have devised an interesting new sort of monument to construct, and in a world cluttered with massive structures, there is something appealing about a monument that can be preserved in a roll of celluloid or a computer. So, with no aspirations to become a regular reviewer, I will keep gazing in awe as new monuments are erected, and occasionally record my frank opinions about the modern-day equivalents of Cheops who create them.

Gary Westfahl

BOOKS



REVIEWED

Although science fiction is prone to attacking those who dare venture onto its territory without acknowledging its complex and insular lineage, close examination of modern sf's toolkit reveals that most of its tropes and themes were originally borrowed from elsewhere. Utopias and dystopias, voyages to other worlds and alternative histories: all are migrant ideas which have mutated rapidly and strangely in the fervid microcosm of sf's island ecology. Take alternative history, for instance. Historians were speculating about alterations in the course of known historical events long before Murray Leinster introduced the motif into modern sf, and the experimental thought-form of the counterfactual essay is still extant today (*Virtual History*, edited by Niall Ferguson, is a fine collection of modern counterfactuals), while the fictional form is still popular with mainstream writers from Len Deighton (*SS-GB*) to Robert Harris (*Fatherland*). Indeed, novels of alternative history published within the genre (and uncomplicated by time-travel, the substitution of magic for technology, or the ability of heroes to range across a multiverse of parallel worlds), are often indistinguishable in intent and affect from novels of alternative history published as mainstream novels.

Which brings us to Brendan Dubois's *Resurrection Day* (Little, Brown, £10), heavily promoted as a thriller by its publishers, but as detailed and plausible an alternative history you could wish for in any genre; as is often the case, the thriller plot is a vehicle for moving us through the altered land-

scapes of a history which has radically diverged from our own.

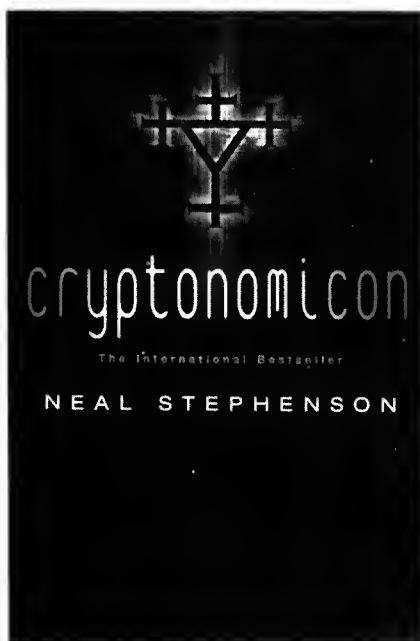
Dubois takes as his historical hinge point the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, which in the back story of *Resurrection Day* escalated into a full-blown nuclear exchange in which the Soviet Union was obliterated and the USA badly damaged. Ten years later, Carl Landry, a reporter with *The Boston Globe*, becomes involved in a murder that is more than it seems, for the victim was in the War Room of the White House when the missiles were launched, and his murder is linked to that of a British general travelling incognito. With his own life in danger, Landry and an English reporter, Sandra Price,

begin to uncover a conspiracy involving the true history of the brief war, the fate of John F. Kennedy and his family, and a secret operation, planned by the perfidious British, which threatens the autonomy of the USA.

The plot, with its loner hero stumbling upon a conspiracy which he uncovers with the help of a beautiful English reporter, does superficially resemble Harris's *Fatherland*, in which a loner hero stumbles upon a conspiracy which he uncovers with the help of a beautiful American reporter. But *Resurrection Day* is a fine thriller in its own right, and the wealth of detail Dubois invests in his portrayal of a half-destroyed USA is impressive. The privations of a devastated country and its bleak psychological landscape, haunted by collective guilt and shame, are skilfully conveyed, relying upon the reader's intelligence rather than crude infodumps. With its rationing, shoddy reconstruction and martial law, the devastated USA resembles post-World War Two Eastern Europe, and its inhabitants are all touched by the war and its aftermath. Landry, a plausibly resourceful hero, lost his sister in the war and, while serving in the army, participated in terrible events in the aftermath of the nuclear exchange (by a nicely black irony, he was recalled from a posting in Vietnam – the Vietnam war, of course, didn't happen in this alternative history – and must endure the taunts of civilians who blame all ex-soldiers for the near-destruction of their country).

Although there's a *deus ex machina* happy ending which feels as if it has been tacked on to lighten the overall bleakness, the escalation of the plot's paranoia index, from the Kafkaesque bureaucracy of martial law to a radioactive New York where survivors have constructed an underground society, is wonderfully judged. *Resurrection Day* deserves a place among the best post-holocaust novels, sf and mainstream, of the cold war.

Ten years ago, cryptography was of little interest to anyone apart from spooks and spies and a few obscure mathematicians. Now, it's used by millions of people every day, and is crucial to the safety and security of commercial transactions within the World Wide Web. Neal Stephenson's *Cryptonomicon* (Avon, \$27.50; Heinemann, £12.99) is a sprawling combination of Pynchonesque secret history and Catch-22 black comedy exploring the hermetic world of codes and cypherpunks, taking the work of mathematicians (including Alan Turing, who pioneered concepts which led to modern computers) at Bletchley Park during the Second World War, as its starting point.



It was at Bletchley Park, of course, that cryptographers cracked the codes of the German Enigma machines, enabling the Allies to pinpoint U-Boats, making the Atlantic safe for convoys and speeding the end of the war. Two of Stephenson's characters, Lawrence Pritchard, an obsessive mathematician, and Bobby Shaftoe, a heroic American Marine, are involved with increasingly dangerous covert operations designed to confuse the enemy and preventing their star mathematician, a one-time colleague of both Pritchard and Turing, from realizing that the Enigma codes have been cracked. Meanwhile, in the present, Pritchard's grandson is a founding member of a computer communications company which, through its work in creating a data haven, becomes mixed up in a search for gold looted by the Japanese whose location is linked to an unbreakable Nazi code and a sunken U-boat.

Cryptonomicon's sprawling, portmanteau narrative, reeking of geeky testosterone and crammed into 900 pages of teeny type, is salted with (sometimes rather interminable) explications of the mathematical patterns which lie behind the seeming randomness of much of our world, and joyously frenetic riffs on everything from the travails of post-industrial capitalism to a cracked molar. It is blackly humorous, tremendously intelligent, electrifying, delightful, boring, baffling, intense, enlightening, crazed, obsessive, and more.

The historical and contemporary plot strands, with their multiple viewpoints and sprawling, hugely complex stories, are laced together with tremendous brio, and there's no denying the enormous narrative momentum Stephenson generates, so it's a little disappointing that the end of the novel, which sets up a confrontation that delivers less than it promises, is rather rushed – a fault shared with his last two novels. However, since *Cryptonomicon* is the first in a triptych of stand-alone but thematically related novels, it remains to be judged whether its ending is more effective as a slingshot into the next volume rather than as a stand-alone conclusion.

Although he wrote four mainstream thrillers (including two in collaboration with his uncle, George Jewsbury) before the sf novels, *Snowcrash* and *The Diamond Age*, for which he is best known, sf has claimed Stephenson as one of its own. And while *Cryptonomicon* is not sf, its secret history shares with sf the heady sense of the world as an arena for the play of intelligence. It seems that no genre can long contain Stephenson's restless intelligence, but there are ample rewards for those readers willing to follow him.

Science fiction may have discovered that history extends ahead of the present moment as well as behind it, but that discovery, once startling, is now a commonplace. The sf genre must come to terms with the fact that writers from outside the field can use its toolkit with as much knowledge and skill as those who have forged their careers on the inside; sf no longer owns exclusive rights to the future.

So while Australian writer James Bradley's *The Deep Field* (Sceptre, £10) is essentially a conventional mainstream novel of loss and self-discovery, it is set about 20 years from now, and told by the daughter of one of the characters from a vantage about a hundred years afterwards. Anna Frasier is a photographer obsessed with discovering what happened to her twin brother, who disappeared after becoming mixed up in political disturbances in Hong Kong. While researching fossil ammonites, Anna meets Seth LaMarque, a blind paleontologist, and his sister Ruth, a lawyer working for Sydney's homeless. To her surprise, Anna falls in love with the dauntingly acerbic Seth, and becomes involved with Ruth's work, particularly after discovering that a self-destructive former client of her agent's is working on ambitious paintings in a disused factory. And then comes the news that her brother may still be alive in Hong Kong, and Anna's new life threatens to unravel.

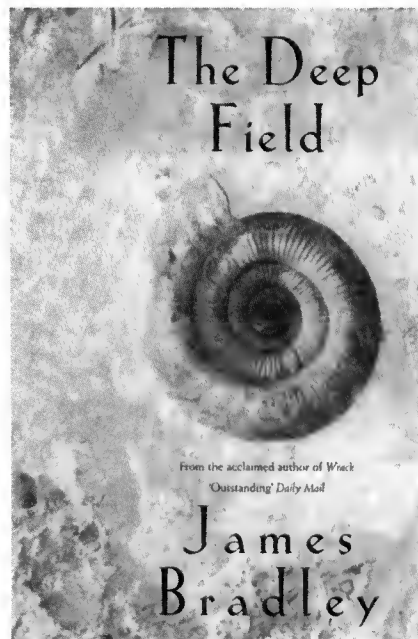
Bradley skilfully and economically evokes the sense of a richly textured future lying only a little askew of our present. His characters inhabit tiny fragile spaces within the huge, impersonal sweep of history and the dislocations of natural disasters: their effervescent stars burn against a background of deep time, embodied in

the fossils which bring Anna and Seth together, and the deep reaches of space penetrated by the first manned Mars expedition. Yet, Bradley suggests, every human life, even those of the dispossessed, is as mysterious and complex as evolutionary or planetary history. In this beautifully written, deeply felt novel, moments of human joy or terror are, subjectively, as important and enduring as anything in the Universe. In Bradley's future (unlike most of sf's futures), the heart is more important than the head.

Finally, a couple of novels from the centre of sf's island territory. Hal Clement, dean of hard science fiction, makes it clear from the start of *Half Life* (Tor, \$23.95) that he has little time for the human condition. The very first page lists the clauses of Special Order Six, which forbids indulgence in speculation and, thereby, argument or irrationality. In short, it outlaws personality from scientific debate, and not only do Clement's characters follow it to the letter, but although they are all aboard the same spaceship, they never physically meet. Clement is intent on deliberately excluding human emotion from his narrative, focusing instead on the scientific mystery at its heart.

Humanity is ravaged by plagues, some new, others horribly virulent variations on well-known diseases. Fifty people have been packed on board a spaceship and dispatched to Titan, for in that moon's organic-rich deep freeze may be found clues to the transition between chemistry and life, and perhaps (by associational logic never explained), to the origin of the burgeoning plagues. None are trained scientists or even astronauts, but all have sufficient training in "the cause-and-effect reasoning needed for research." They are, by implication, exemplary citizens of a technological democracy, and apart from their diseases, they are virtually indistinguishable from one another.

The investigation (one hesitates to call it a story) proceeds at a brisk pace as Clement's characters engage in solitary struggles, delineated with scrupulous care, against the adversities of Titan's liquid-methane climate. Something plausibly poised halfway between chemistry and life is duly found; one of the characters sacrifices himself so that it might be quickened by contact with the fertile biochemistry of the human body; a kind of resolution is achieved. Here, as in the best novels of a career which stretches over more than 50 years, Clement masterfully evokes the rich strangeness of the physical universe, while his human characters are no



more than interchangeable mouth-pieces extolling wonders. One must remember that this mode of storytelling was once the norm in sf; it is a measure of how far we have come that Clement is now compelled to evoke special pleading for exclusion of the strange richness of the human heart from his thought experiments.

Silver Screen (Macmillan, £9.99), Justina Robson's first novel, might be accused of going too far in the other direction. While it begins with a valiant attempt to put a new spin on that old sf chestnut, artificial intelligence, by its end almost all of its ideas have been dropped in favour of the examination at interminable length of the self-indulgent misery of its heroine.

It's the middle of the next century. Anjuli O'Connell is an AI psychologist, part of a team working on a powerful, self-aware computer known as 901, to which she is linked via a brain implant. Although 901 is essential for the operation of the communications company which ostensibly owns it, the company wants to perform a kind of lobotomy to limit its growing power; if identified as a true artificial intelligence, it will win freedom. The plot quickens when Anjuli's childhood friend, Roy Croft, an eccentric genius who is part of her team, commits suicide. He appears to have uploaded his personality into the Swarm, an AI which roves the Internet, and has left behind a clue to something which may be essential to



determining 901's status, a clue which only Anjuli can unravel.

Anjuli is an intriguingly unusual character to find at the centre of an sf novel. The exact opposite to the default brash, can-do American hero, not overly bright but schooled amongst geniuses because she has a perfect eidetic memory, she feels that she's a fraud, and it's a tribute to the care Robson invests in all of her characters that she is able to evoke in the reader considerable sympathy for someone given to wallowing in depressive

fugues at the slightest provocation.

Indeed, Anjuli's first bout of depression, after she discovers Roy's body, is nicely realized, as is the way her close-knit team and 901 (which manifests itself, rather archly, in a variety of guises borrowed from classic movies) rally around her. However, Robson appears to be increasingly embarrassed by the accoutrements of the thriller she apparently set out to write, and gradually, the plot drifts away from the narration.

The struggle for 901's autonomy mostly happens off-stage; Anjuli misses most of a crucial trial because she's depressed, and then abandons her boyfriend after he's mutilated while retrieving the diary Roy has (for a reason I couldn't quite grasp) secreted in the well-defended abbey owned by his religious maniac of a father; she enters a near catatonic sulk when her brother is killed, presumably by company agents who then don't bother to chase her; and by the time she solves Roy's puzzle, I'd lost track of what had been happening to 901. Nevertheless, the strongly realized Northern England setting, the unobtrusively detailed sense of the future, and some moments of self-knowing humour which guy the heroine's suffocating self-regard, suggest that, providing she can find a narrative form she's comfortable inhabiting, Robson has the potential to produce something more engaging.

Paul J. McAuley

Werewolves and vampires frequently appear as viewpoint characters, but apart from a few perfunctory stories by Clark Ashton Smith long ago, I think no one has given much consideration to the feelings of zombies. Now Gordon Houghton has chosen to rectify that omission with **The Apprentice** (Anchor, £9.99).

His unnamed first-person protagonist is wrenched from the peace of the grave to act as apprentice/assistant to Death. Death has no need for either an assistant or an apprentice (or anything else really), but someone has wasted his last one, and the lack leaves him feeling one down to War, who has a gopher called Skirmish (not even a zombie can be induced to assist Pestilence or Famine). The Apprentice therefore settles down to work his seven-day indenture, but even a zombie finds the atmosphere hard to stomach. That he has been resurrected minus several fingers and his penis is a minor irritant; that the clothes provided for him are hideous and ill-fitting can be shrugged off – unlike vampires, zombies have never been snappy dressers; even the society of Skirmish, who has a taste for inane practical jokes, is just about support-

able; what bugs him is the ineluctable pointlessness of all the activities in which the Four Nondescript-Car-Drivers (horses are a bit *passé*) engage.

Their alleged work is a bit like that of an obsolete government agency in a bureaucratic regime. Everything it once did has been phased out or transferred elsewhere, but no one has authority to close it down; starved of funds and resources, its remaining skeleton personnel are still required to clock in and shuffle paper, but have

adopted the personae of demoralized futility suited to those who are too inept to trust, train or advance, but too timidly compliant to dismiss. None of Pestilence's new creations ever develop into a full-blown plague, War and Famine find their functions fully discharged by Man's inhumanity to Man, and Death is reduced to superintending the termination of one token life *per diem*, while the other quarter million or so make their way to a better (or worse) place unaided.

The Apprentice, forced to tag along while Death discharges his "duties" with the insouciant fancy of the terminally bored but with no élan whatever, concentrates on the two ambitions open to him: to perform such tasks as he is assigned as badly as possible, and to recall the circumstances surrounding his own death (to ask Death would be vain).

At the end of the book, having been assessed and found – no, I won't tell you. As is proper to a tale of the living dead, *The Apprentice* is short on pace, but a lot of the jokes are good, and the ending is neat, if somewhat contrived. This is a true oddity, a one-off, and I commend it to anyone in search of something genuinely different.

Skeleton Personnel

Chris Gilmore



Reviewing the first two volumes of Kate Elliott's *Crown of Stars* series in *Interzone* 127 and 136 I was able to offer cautious praise: the milieu was interesting, the characters were engaging, the stories were coming along nicely. With *The Burning Stone* (Orbit, £17.99 & £10.99) standards have slipped. The book fails to develop some promising characters, while introducing far too many new ones, necessitating kaleidoscopic jumps between locations as Elliott strives to keep up with them all; moreover, the ornamentation, always lush, has become excessive. The games she played with dark-age and medieval history and theology enriched the first two books, but this one is cluttered with magical travel between hilltop stone circles; another, unrelated form of travel between worlds; a phoenix-cum-griffin; a centauress; sundry incorporeal servitors; the magic of the Eika; an undignified but unfunny subplot about the determination of Biscop Judith to wed and bed a pretty, teenage toyboy who is obviously gay to everyone except herself; sundry healing miracles; and much, much more.

Apart from infecting the narrative with inurbane sprawl, all this clutter diverts attention from the important questions of whether Liath will free herself from the odious attentions of Hugh; whether Alain will master his unexpected inheritance (and recognize Thallia for the incorrigibly bad lot she is); and whether King Henry will be able to withstand the incursions of the barbarous Quman. While there's development on all these fronts, far too little is achieved for a book of this length. Half drowned in its 750 pages there's a decent 450-page third volume, but if I hadn't been required to review it, I doubt that I'd have finished it. More discipline required, but I'd bet against its appearance – I sense that Elliott herself is getting bored. Her writing is still above average for the genre, with some very good touches when Alain is at some point, but less strikingly so than before. Moreover, the city analogous to Rome in this world is called Darre, but she forgets and refers to it as Rome at least once, suggesting that she's gone off the boil. Altogether, a disappointment.

I conclude with a terse of novellas, and I should say at the outset that I regard the idea of publishing solo novellas as inherently unsound. The appreciation of good literature is elitist by definition, which should not prevent the writer from striving towards the ideal that all great art should be popular; yet when the economics of production and distribution ensure that the reader will get less book for his buck,

then the writer must expect to reach a narrower audience. "Fit audience, though few?" I think not – more a case of "small audience, because exclusive," in the naffest possible sense. This is exacerbated if the thing appears in a limited edition of signed copies, resurrecting the old joke about "the rare, unsigned copies" which I have seen applied to works by Andy Warhol and Sir Edward Heath. You know a man by the company he keeps. In the case of PS Publishing, the reader is expected to pay nearly 25 times more for a page of Graham Joyce or James Lovegrove than Orbit asks for a page of Kate Elliott. If they're 25 times as good, it should emerge from sales-figures and staying-power. It should not affect the cover price.

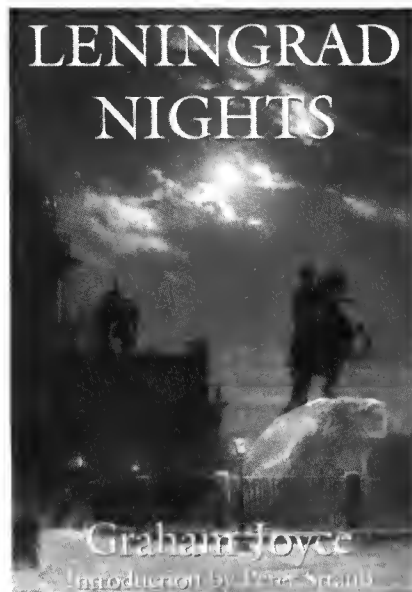
To start with Graham Joyce, *Leningrad Nights* (£25 and £8) is less a fantasy than a fantasia on the effects of prolonged and terrible suffering on the human spirit. Human history being what it is, it's unlikely that anyone will find much of great originality to say on that subject, and Joyce's themes have been touched on quite directly by (*inter alia*) Karen Blixen, Anthony Burgess and Tanith Lee. Nonetheless, this description of the horrors peculiar to experiencing adolescence against the backdrop of the Siege of Leningrad, and the manner in which Leo, the boy hero, succeeds in maintaining his larger sanity by embracing a specific form of madness, is not only extremely well done from an artistic viewpoint, it's also morally uplifting – a good story in both senses.

Going on to Lovegrove, *How the Other Half Lives* (same prices) is described in Colin Greenland's introduction as a Faustian story. So it is, sort of, but it isn't Faust's tale being retold, it's that of Polykrates of Samos. Polykrates lived a life of such grandeur and luxury that he feared the gods

might become jealous, so he offered them a great sacrifice. He owned, and took great pride in, the largest emerald known to exist anywhere, but he cast it into the sea as an act of propitiation. A few weeks later he was served with a magnificent turbot (or mullet – accounts vary) and when he cut into it, he found his emerald returned to him. He took this as a sign that the gods appreciated his gesture, but required no sacrifice – wrongly, for in fact they had rejected his sacrifice as inadequate. Not long after he was betrayed and captured by an agent of the Great King, who annexed Samos and subjected Polykrates to a horrible and lingering death.

Lovegrove combines this story with Ursula Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," which is not really a story, but a rather smug sermon on a text from William James. Suppose it were possible to achieve marvellous prosperity by committing, on a regular basis, acts of gross brutality against an entirely innocent person? Wouldn't most people do so? Would you, most Gentle of Readers, or would I? Would Le Guin? And if we high-mindedly refused, wouldn't we regret it in our darker moments? A good thing for all of us that it isn't possible, though Michael Marshall Smith explored it to a limited degree in *Spare* (reviewed in *Interzone* 117), as did Raymond Hawkey in *Side Effect*. Unfortunately, from an artistic viewpoint, Lovegrove chooses to change the ending: on this occasion the sacrifice is accepted, with a consequent loss of tension in the concluding pages. Nonetheless, the story is developed with his usual wit and attention to detail and some excellent dialogue between Ian North (the Polykrates figure) and his Mephistophelean maven, Dr Tottleben, whose name looks as if it ought to be German for "to live till it kills you."

Lovegrove is also author, in collaboration with Peter Crowther, of *The Hand that Feeds* (Maynard Sims Productions, £5 or \$10), a novella of similar length but much less pretentiously produced – and there's the rub, once again. Should one be asked to pay the going rate for a medium-length A-format paperback for a poorly made, 64-page stapled folio? My feeling is that one should not, especially as this one gives the impression that it's part of a series. There is, we are told, a sort of coven or cabal of six persons with supernatural powers. They are not exactly Illuminati, less still are they the Secret Masters of the Universe, but they know more than they are prepared to share. They are not immortal, though they go in for reincarnation, nor are



they always the same, though the number six is always made up. Moreover, they have their silly side, which reminds me slightly of R. A. Lafferty's Institute stories.

So far so good; if Lovegrove and Crowther intend to develop a series about them this story, in which they attempt a favour for a dying friend which backfires very badly leaving them with two gaps in their ranks, isn't at all a bad opener. It hasn't the zany brilliance of vintage Lafferty, as the authors don't seem quite sure whether to play it straight or for laughs (hint: laughs is better); but once they can get into the swing of it, the series should improve, and once

they've got half a dozen or so there'll be enough for a book.

And that's where we came in. A fiver is rather a lot to pay for the pilot episode of what may or may not be an abortive series, yet it isn't going to make a fortune for anyone. The stand-alone novella is the wrong idea, and people like Leo Margulies and Groff Conklin, who put anything up to half a dozen together, and brought them out cheaply under such titles as *Six Great Short Science Fiction Novels*, had the right idea. For that matter, I don't even know the name of the editor at Eyre and Spottiswood who brought out *Sometime, Never* in 1956 at 12/6d – still, I think, a bit less than

£25 now. That book contained William Golding's "Envoy Extraordinary," John Wyndham's "Consider Her Ways" and Mervyn Peake's "Boy in Darkness." Talk about Value!

So I don't recommend anyone to buy any of these. Instead, badger your public library to buy them for you. That way the writers will get some PLR, and maybe an enterprising publisher will buy the second rights and bundle them up at a reasonable price. As for the money... it's public money, and unless you persuade them to buy books, the librarians will only waste it on jigsaws or videos. *Vive la littérature!*

Chris Gilmore

If the conjecture is on target, and there is an alternative universe for every decision we make on a day-to-day basis for the duration of our lives, then trillions of resulting universes will be similar to our own. Briefly peek in. The book reviewer might fly to the kitchen for his hourly cup of tea, or might, with a click of his fingers, summon the teapot on its tiny turtle legs to bring him a drink, but essentially the reviewer's role is the same. There is a middle-aged and extremely successful author named Perry Pratchett who writes about divorces and affairs, mechanics and street life, markets and the mighty English Pub. He writes what we, here, would regard as the staple fare of soap operas.

The soap opera, surely, is what Terry Pratchett's Discworld is also simulating. More than the (impressive) frequency of his output, there is the sense (or in my case, the reality) that one could arrive at a new book, not having read much in the past, and know a good deal of the characters within a few lines. I hereby admit that I first read Pratchett in 1990, or thereabouts, so I was already seven years behind the commencement of the Discworld series. Nevertheless, I began at the beginning, with *The Colour of Magic*, found it perfectly fine, occasionally amusing, and that was enough of that, thanks. Although I've read none of his intervening novels, I've kept abreast of the reviews, and I know which one is about Christmas, about Australia, about rock 'n' roll. And if it's true that I've suspected a gradual slackening of authorial ambition, I've also listened to the counter-arguments: that Pratchett has created a universe which can serve as the vehicle for any subject he wishes to tackle. On the evidence of the first novel, various shorter pieces that I've read, and of *The Fifth Elephant* (Doubleday, £16.99), which is the 24th volume, it would seem that Pratchett's work is well-paced and easy; it is middle-

ground fiction, it will do very well, and I liked it. The universe that tunes into Pratchett's product and sees – in the faces of wizards and witches and trolls – a tweaked and exaggerated, but easily recognizable, depiction of their own existence, will regard *The Fifth Elephant* as a very safe book indeed. The author has bet with chips of low denomination.

But I repeat: I liked it. Familiarity,

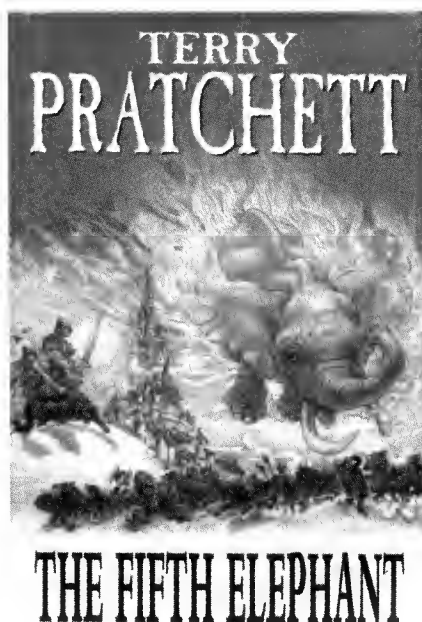
Whiter Than White

David Mathew

as yet, after only two novels with a nine-year gap between them, has not bred contempt. Indeed, certain characters – Vimes and Vetinari, for example – are welcomed like old friends. Accompanied by a troll and a dwarf, Vimes goes on a diplomatic mission to Uberwald, where mines containing fat are worked. Vetinari is obliged to discipline Colon, who rises quickly in the police ranks in the absence of Vimes, because he, Colon, is "Cutting out the dead wood, sah!" of the force, firing officers willy-nilly (and he's obsessed with having his sugar lumps stolen, to boot). Colon, it might also be said, is somewhat zealous in his police work, clamping the opera house for illegal parking, among other things. Meanwhile, Carrot goes in pursuit of a woman who is also a wolf, with a dog that can talk. And before long, the novel is freezing with snow and there are werewolves hunting Vimes and the panic is rising.

What is interesting about *The Fifth Elephant* is that nothing seems forced. The pratfalls that I'd expected to crowd the paragraphs are far between; life is *serious* now. The conurbations are choked with shadows; the fields are drowned in snow. There is a fading-out of colour in this novel – in places, it is whiter than white – and the effect, moreover, is successful. Discworld has matured, grown wise, grown weary; there are wrinkles around its eyes. The comic bluster of badly-connected conversations still works well, and there are puns along the lines of mistaking the word "halibut" for "halberd," and that sort of thing. But it comes as a shock to realize, barely a quarter of the way in, that this is a fantasy novel that need not have the word "comic" in its job description. There are no bad puns to stick in the throat, or to groan at; if you want to find them, you must do the work yourself.

Backing into Chaz Brenchley's *Shelter* (NEL, £5.99), and finding



a path through *his* snow, one is reminded of *The Information* by Martin Amis. A character named Richard Tull, who writes "fanatically difficult modern prose," is working on a novel that has an "octuple time scheme and sixteen unreliable narrators."

Brenchley's novel is not like *that*, but it squirms and it's slippery, and its voices (deliberately) confuse and manipulate. It's very strange. Crest this particular ice-coated rise, and see that the land beyond is not how you expected it to be; and look behind and already the footprints are being filled in. The reader must track and retrack in this novel, and all because of a first person narrator called Rowan.

Rowan is at the end of his teens and at university when a friend is killed. To recuperate, Rowan returns to the valley, his childhood home, and he introduces us to a collection of drinking buddies, an older woman (with whom he re-establishes a sexual and sometimes-prickly relationship) and the woman's brother, who has emotional problems and other difficulties. Along with Rowan we build a stone wall and go "starwalking," which means taking drug-trips in the open air... As *Shelter* is a hymn to alcoholism (with the protection offered by drink being true protection, albeit short-lived, and with all addictions being a means to step outside time anyway), we also visit a good deal of pubs. It is possible that Rowan, through the systematic abuse of the body and mind, and the redemptive forces of shared love, might already be healing.

His plot becomes tangled with that of a group of travellers, in particular a father's two young children, who have turned their vehicle into a sort of playground ("They were six and eight, and they had always lived in the Castle"), which they share with him, and thereafter we get their side of the story, although not in the first person. The children are wise. They hide when the travellers are attacked. Also wise, Rowan stops his own fiercely independent mother (a storyteller) from trying to help the innocents – the subtext being, perhaps, that only so many can be sheltered at any one time in any one place. It's open for debate.

Laced in with these voices is an unexpected narrative involving woodland spirits, a further subplot about child-abuse (the police are informed that there is a sex offender in the vicinity) and the book is saturated with references to pop songs, literature, and ideas about the very nature of storytelling. It is also peppered with odd cod-Shakespearean phrases ("I liked it not"), which might seem more appropriate to the other string

of Brenchley's bow – the fantasy work – and which bump for a while. In addition, the voice of Robert Frost is loud and clear across the whiteness: there are references to "fire and frost" and the road not taken, and the snowy woods on a winter's evening. It's a very cold book: does "fantasy-crime" suffice? We need a term that covers the psychology of fantasy that has been set into a crime framework.

For now we'll simply call it Brenchley.

Ethan Coen, who with brother Joel, has made films such as *Raising Arizona*, *Barton Fink*, *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski*, has now published his first book of short stories, *Gates of Eden* (Transworld, £6.99). If you've seen the films, you'll know that the Coen brothers have a distinctive way of looking at the world, and a fine sense of everyday absurdity... *Gates of Eden* being one of the funniest books I've read, the stories herein can be described in the same way. There is no sf content, but several of the stories are surrealist pieces and fantasies; others are simpler crime tales, but no less entertaining.

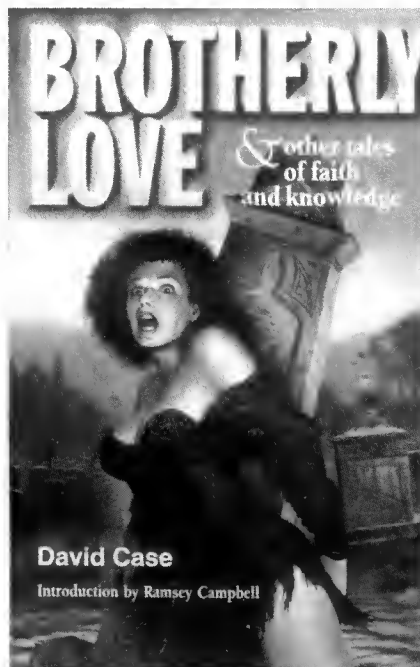
In "Destiny" a lousy boxer is employed to take secret photographs of a wife having sex with another man... and he ends up in such a world of pain that remaining in the ring to get pummelled might have been more sensible. "Cosa Minapolidan" sees a group of gangsters move to Minneapolis, which is seen as "an odd choice": "The city had not much serious crime. It was dotted with scenic lakes. The people were polite. Many owned boats. In the summer they engaged in water sports..." When no one pays them much notice,

they are obliged to whack someone out, but because these guys are putzes, the boss goes to jail. Thereafter a rumour circulates that he has been killed by a homosexual, so revenge must be exacted. But how to find a homosexual? "It was suggested that the organization 'go underground,' but what exactly this meant no one could say."

There is a lot of creaking leather and other sound effects in "Hector Berlioz, Private Investigator." This is because, like the Gentlemen's Club pastiche, "The Old Boys", it is a radio script, or has been presented as such – with the music-writing, wise-cracking Berlioz a typical hackneyed detective, and a prey to drink and dames. As with much of Coen's writing, there is a certain snob-value to the laughs: he shows people in positions of power or responsibility to have no knowledge. To wit: "Wonderful people, the French. Beautiful women, fine wines, and of course... the windmills." In "A Morty Story" the full effects of relatives who overstay their welcome is examined.

In addition to these stories, there are another nine. It's not a big volume and ultimately it's throwaway material that doesn't amount to much; but to read it, expecting nothing more than to be temporarily entertained, it's a joy. And as shallow as I'm sure it makes me, I'm always pleased when a piece of fiction works to such an extent that I find myself thinking, for a period of time, of some of its key phrases. So surely no greater compliment can be offered than the following. Because of Coen I temporarily changed an (oft-used) expression: the one employed to criticize other drivers, who of course are always in the wrong. With great satisfaction I deferred to the hoodlum in Coen's "Destiny" and gave the perpetrator a cry of, "Ya fuck'n Bagadonuts!" But I'm over it now.

David Case, in *Brotherly Love & Other Tales of Faith and Knowledge* (Pumpkin Books, £16.99), has six long and varied stories. Case is the author of *The Cell and Other Tales of Horror* (1969) and *Fengriffen and Other Stories* (1971), both of which received good notices and established the author's reputation in the field; but until now the most recent work in the genres that concern us was *The Third Grave* (1982). His return, on Gothic wings, should be applauded: this collection is beautifully written. The title story is a disturbing piece about a man who is trying to track down his runaway sister, in the back of the reader's mind the question being: why did she run away? "The Foreign Bride" is a fan-





tasy tale of a young woman's jealousy of the woman who marries the first woman's employer; the lengths to which this vengeful woman will stoop are remarkable.

"The Terrestrial Fancy" is a long science-fiction novella; "Jimmy" deals with American small-town paranoia; and weird science is the subject of "Anachrona." Possibly the collection's most consistently brilliant piece, however, is "The Ogre of the Cleft," in which a meek man is set a challenge by the princess: to destroy the ogre. To do this he engages some dangerous

help, and the journey is fraught.

Pumpkin Books, as I've said before, are fighting a good fight to give genre writers a new chance, a new voice, and in this Case, a new audience. But I do wish the typographical errors could be removed. Rare, of course, is the perfect text, and *Brotherly Love* is not exactly *spotty* with typos but there are plenty more annoying pimples than those which follow. Oscar Wilde wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, not *Dorian Grey*. It should be "hers," not "her's"; "to choose", not "to chose." Yes okay, it's picky, but a

reviewer *should* pick at the blemishes, should he not? When Pumpkin Books has gone to such lengths to secure good, appropriate cover art, an informative introduction by Ramsey Campbell, and (importantly) a clear typeface, and (most importantly) entertaining stories, it is a shame when a sentence deflates because of inattentive proofreading. Pumpkin Books, it seems, has the means and the inclination to produce great work; now it simply needs to wash its face more often.

David Mathew

If there is one thing that is really annoying, it is shoddy books. Unfortunately, the quality of mass-produced books in this country has declined so much that a small but lucrative market has been created among collectors for high-quality, usually first, editions of books by highly regarded authors. And a number of small presses has emerged to supply this market. Such presses come and go, and the latest to come to my notice is PS Publishing, with a chapbook of Graham Joyce's novella *Leningrad Nights* (PS Publishing, £8 pb, £25 hb). Chris Gilmore's review of the text on page 57 is balanced and fair – it is a superb piece of work on Joyce's part – but he rightly attacks the cover price as exorbitant. However, he does not go nearly far enough. While the text seems to be properly edited, its presentation and typesetting is so bad that when a certain big-name author told me PS were going to publish a novella by him I begged him to let me typeset it so he could avoid Joyce's fate. My advice to potential buyers of these books is wait until someone publishes them in a properly-produced value-for-money edition. I am in the market for a treasurable copy of the Joyce. Any offers?

It is, of course, unfair to make such comments without giving specific examples, and the simplest way to do this is by comparison. In the same post from the same dealer – I *bought* both these books – came John Whitbourn's *More Binscombe Tales* (Ash-Tree Press, £25), and a greater contrast would be hard to find. Where the Joyce gives 48 numbered pages of which only 36 actually carry Joyce's work, poorly typeset in unpleasantly letterspaced, too-small type with overlong lines too close together, the Whitbourn gives 225 pages of his writing, plus xvi pages of editorial matter including the four pages of Whitbourn's introduction, all pleasingly typeset in correct proportions in a legible font. Where the PS publication cover has a greyscale reproduction of a 19th-century painting with badly-superimposed type and no titling on the spine, the Ash-

Travesty, Triptych and Transcendence

Paul Brazier

Tree has original line art printed in black with the type carefully set in an unusual but suitable typeface and printed in a special dark green on a heavy laid cream paper dustjacket with an extremely unusual dark green cloth cover, silk bindings and elegant deep red end papers. In short, Whitbourn's book looks and feels as if

it is worth the £25 it cost even before reading begins.

And what of the reading? These appear to be pub stories, in the tradition of Spider Robinson's *Callahan's Cross Time Saloon* or Arthur C. Clarke's *Tales from the White Hart*, in that they often centre on The Duke of Argyll, a fictional pub in Binscombe. However, in the distinctive Whitbourn style, they are so firmly set in this particular place that the village of Binscombe almost becomes another character. As with Clarke and Robinson, there is nothing so outlandish that it can't be believed in a pub story, and equally as with them there is a large amount of exasperation at not fully grasping why these strange things keep happening here.

However, the most notable aspect of these stories is the way Whitbourn manages to set up perfectly ordinary if rather uncomfortable situations, then twist them so that even though the individual story arrives at a resolution, the situation becomes ever more uncomfortable. The source of this discomfort is many-fold. There is the basic situation – the stories invariably centre on Mr Oakley, a late-comer to the little Surrey village of Binscombe, who, while in fact a returning native, has never been allowed to feel fully part of the local culture. Next is the story itself – this can vary from cosmological to trite, usually involving the revelation of some further supernatural element to life in the village, and all to the continued bafflement of Mr Oakley. Finally, there is the prose style. One can never delight in a Whitbourn sentence: there is always a faint discomfort. But then the stories aren't delightful. The full gamut is here, from alternate world sf through fey fantasy to grotesque horror, and all the while the reader feels, as does Oakley, that while they are accepted they are not really welcome. In which case, why *should* the reader be delighted? There is no finding fault with the grammar or syntax, and one is left only with style as the source. Such stories have, in common with soap opera, a lack of real conclusion that becomes necessary where

MORE BINSCOMBE TALES SINISTER SUTANGLI STORIES



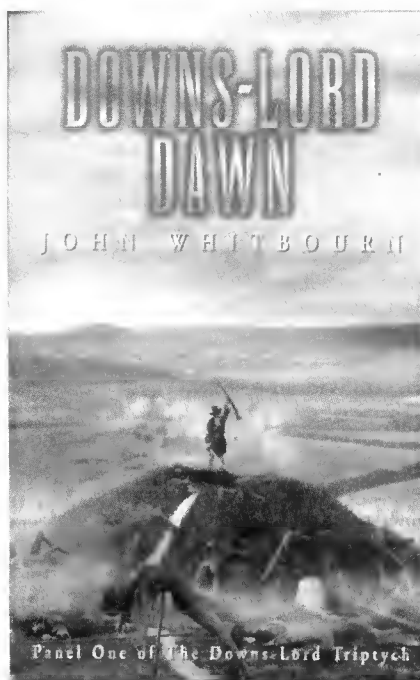
John Whitbourn

continuation is expected. As the reader understands this, so it becomes plain that the discomfort is with open-ended story-telling, and thus Whitbourn's real achievement is that he never lets us become comfortable with that.

Having said that, the final story here, fenced around with dire warnings lest it spoil your enjoyment of the others, does close off the series, and, hardly strangely therefore, is the most satisfying. In fact, Whitbourn waxes positively elegiac, finally quoting several lines of Belloc's "Duncton Wood" in tribute to his characters' and his own deep attachment to his native village and its surrounding countryside. To be sure these stories are not comfortable to read, but they still bring enjoyment of good company and the vicarious chill of a good fright at someone else's expense, and as such are to be heartily recommended.

Published at the same time, John Whitbourn's most recent novel, *Downs-Lord Dawn* (Earthlight, £5.99) is "Panel One of The Downs-Lord Triptych," the first volume in a trilogy that promises to be every bit as stimulating as his shorter stories and previous novels.

We begin in familiar Whitbourn territory, 17th-century Capri, with a lascivious soldier-adventurer who encounters a beggar who has a tale to tell. That the beggar's tale is the substance of the book and that we never return to the doings of Theophilus Oglethorpe in Capri is probably my only criticism of its structure – but perhaps Whitbourn is saving that for the closing of the third novel. Apart from this introduction, the structure is perfectly clear: although the narrative hops around in time in a most demented fashion, with no chapters numbered but only tiny images of the Long Man of Wilmington and Whitbourn's characteristic quoting of fic-



tional historical sources to set one section off from another, still we emerge from the end of the story with a clear grasp of what could easily have been a bewildering narrative. The cover says it all, really – a Jacobean figure stands on a Downs barrow triumphantly holding a musket aloft with a battlefield strewn with dead monsters before him.

To clarify, Downs are ranges of chalk hills to the south of London: the North Downs run from Folkestone in Kent up through the outskirts of the town and into Surrey, while the South Downs run along the south coast of England from Eastbourne through Brighton, where this review is being written, to Winchester. They are important because, as the title of the book implies, they are almost the entire setting of the story. Reverend Blades of Godalming finds a portal to another world in the back of a long-

case clock, steps through and –

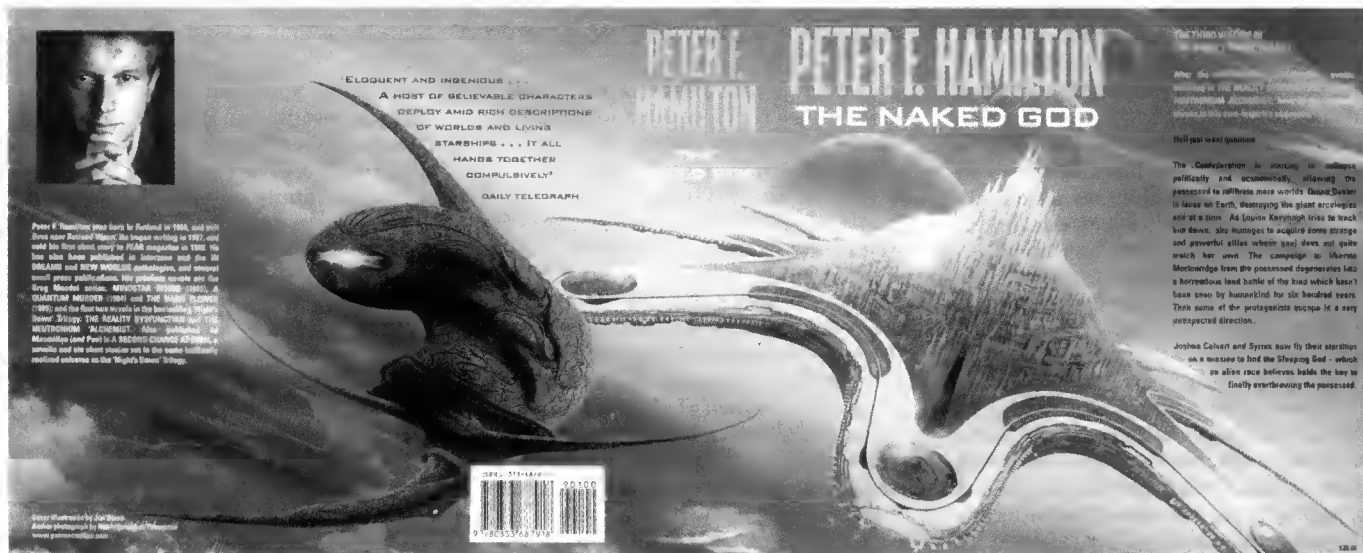
The first hour was like a good day on the Downs: brisk, breeze-blessed, striding with only God's creation for company, and the happy analogy just kept on fitting, as the two landscapes proved to be kith and kin. These too were rolling hills of grass-topped chalk, though more scrub-colonised, less sheep-cropped, than the Downs he knew. (p22)

– as wonderful an evocation of Downs-walking as I have read anywhere.

Blades soon realizes that this is, in fact, the same countryside, untamed by human beings as his own version of the world has been, although there are humans here – and their predators. And these are all the fantasy elements. From now on, as in his other novels, Whitbourn applies a scientific rigour to the development of the story, and it would be unkind of me to reveal how it develops. It is certainly savage, often grotesque, but sometimes also tender and very human – and well worth your time. Buy it and read it!

A note on style: Whitbourn's prose style has its detractors, and certainly it is not exactly contemporary. However, he seems to favour the plain-speaking style of the period he most often depicts, only rendering it in a modern idiom. Where some contemporary authors seem obsessed with writing in the tortuous, stilted style of the late 19th century, Whitbourn's late 17th-century prose does indeed seem plain, unadorned, even a trifle gauche, but is, by this commentator, much preferred for those very qualities.

From the commencement of one trilogy we move to the conclusion of another. Peter Hamilton's completion of the *Night's Dawn* trilogy, *The Naked God* (Macmillan, £20) needs little commendation. Either you will have read the first two, and are massively hooked, or you haven't, in which case you are unlikely to want





to read this book first. Although it can be read as a stand-alone novel, it would be a miserable and self-denying thing to do, for having finished this wonderful book, the reader would then be compelled to go back and read the first two, knowing already how the story ends.

Of course it ends well. This is science fiction, not horror. Of course it ends sanely and rationally. This is science fiction, not fantasy. There was an idea in the air at the recent WorldCon in Melbourne that the natural resolution of hard science fiction is transcendence. I think it was first bruited by Greg Benford and Peter Nicholls in a discussion of hard sf, but I heard it several times during the convention. Books by Greg Bear, Robert Heinlein and Kim Stanley Robinson were invoked to illustrate the point, as were the *Star Wars* and some *Star Trek* films. Having read the first two books of the *Night's Dawn* trilogy and perceived a shift of focus from visceral in the first to mental in the second, I was expecting the third to be spiritual – the title, *The Naked God*, came as little surprise – and this theory of transcendence-as-resolution appeared to fit with as much as I had then read of this conclusion of the *Night's Dawn* trilogy.

"Not so," said Hamilton when asked. "It is more about choices." And, of course, transcendence can't be the resolution, because the very core of the story is that people who have died and gone into the beyond manage to find a way back into our universe and possess other living people. Transcendence thus appears to be the very root of the story, not its resolution. In fact, Hamilton has some fun with this. Once living people realize they can come back after they die, they reappear with almost comical relish at the most opportune moments to pursue unfinished business. But then, given human nature, who wouldn't?

Interestingly, every such on-the-face-of-it impossible or ludicrous plot development is equally implied in the first introduction of the related character, idea or artefact, so that the escalation of surprise, awe and wonder that Hamilton unfolds so apparently effortlessly is always accompanied by an almost immediate sense of rightness. This wonder followed by the "but-of-course" moment is tremendously satisfying as story-telling, but more significantly, it indicates just how rigorously Hamilton has thought through every detail of this massive story.

There can be no doubt that it is tremendously structured. Every facet has its parallel that allows us to compare and contrast different solutions to the same problem. Adamists have neural nanonics, a kind of mental e-mail,

or electronic telepathy; the Edenists have affinity, a kind of empathic telepathy. The Edenists rescue the memory/personality of Edenists who die, so they live on in a kind of limbo gestalt, to be consulted and venerated by future generations; the souls in the beyond come back to possess still-living humans, but are mostly bad sorts. There are two living habitats, Tranquillity, whose very name tells us she is good, and Valisk, the tormented renegade habitat with the name so redolent of Philip K. Dick's *Valis*. On the individual level there is reluctant hero Joshua Calvert, a heroic exploit of whose is the central thread in each of the three books, balanced almost exactly by baddie Quinn Dexter, the originator of the entire possessed problem, advocate of the dark faith of God's Brother, and harbinger of the eponymous Night's Dawn. And on the purely personal level, there are the two women Calvert has impregnated in the first book, each equally enamoured of him and equally incapable of spending her life with him.

Such attention to detail in the structural elements – and I could fill this page with examples – indicate that Hamilton has expended a great deal of effort in getting the story to work. This would be an astonishing achievement in a 300-page novel. That the structure disappears so completely into the story-telling over this huge narrative; that for all its inter-galactic sweep the narrative is so tightly focused and controlled; and that the author manages to bring the entire narrative to a satisfying and transcendent completion, is a monumental achievement. I haven't experienced such mind-stretchingly, gob-smackingly wonderful moments in a book since I first read E.E. "Doc" Smith. It would appear that Peter F. Hamilton has managed to re-energize my sense of wonder, and thus the only fitting word to describe this trilogy, an epithet often used and yet rarely so richly deserved, must be "masterpiece."

But what is this masterpiece telling us? A story this awesome must have an informing philosophy, and it is likely that in future scholars will labour long and hard to find its true depth. Christianity certainly underlies the entire story – the two human factions are Adamists and Edenists, for example – but this may be no more than a structural reflection of our own society. It is far more likely that something entirely new is being attempted.

Since the dawn of civilization, humanity has tried to explain the universe it inhabits to itself, and the more credible have led the more credulous among us into many codifications of belief. Sacrifices to make the

rain come, midwinter festivals to ensure the return of the sun, all are intercessions designed to convince the credulous – the believers – that the credible – the priests – have some understanding of, and thus power to alter, the world we live in.

One of the more recent codifications of belief is science, and the real difference here is that science has not only explained away the priests' miracles, but has replaced them with miracles of its own that believers can repeat for themselves. So far so good, but the priests only used their miracles to convince their believers that all their other answers were true. Yet there are many questions that science has not yet addressed, and foremost of these are "What happens when we die?" and "Why do we have to die?"

Perhaps the high priests of science should use their scientific rigour to examine these questions, and certainly with the advances in medical science and the mapping of the human genome the quest for immortality implicit in the second question may be on the verge of answer. And sf has explored the ramifications – what if we didn't have to die? – in great detail.

Science-fiction writers have also taken on the other question, "What happens when we die?" and, because sf is essentially optimistic, the answer is usually some kind of physically-mediated transcendence, as discussed at the beginning of this review. Hamilton short-circuits this solution neatly by depicting proof that all sentient beings have immortal souls (hitherto an unprovable assumption in even the most dogmatic of religions), by promising there is further transcendence to be achieved (Laton, the renegade Edenist, bears witness), and by making the initial transcendence into the beyond into the problem at the centre of the story.

If, then, transcendence is not the solution, what is? There are many and various philosophies, ethics, attitudes and creeds advanced in this book, all of which are of direct use to the espouser. But the only one that seems to ring true when you have enjoyed a book as hugely as this one is stated simply by Louise Kavanagh. She is 16 and pregnant with Calvert's child, she has seen her family possessed and her world taken out of this universe. She has escaped to London to carry a warning to someone unworthy and uncaring, and London is soon to fall to the possessed. She is staying at the Ritz, and calls for Norfolk Tears, the most luxurious of drinks and now the rarest, as her world, its only source, has been removed. Her toast is –

"To living life, not wasting it." (p552)

I'll drink to that.

Paul Brazier

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Allen, Roger McBride. **The Game of Worlds.** "David Brin's Out of Time." Avon, ISBN 0-380-79969-3, 246pp, A-format paperback, cover by Peter Bollinger & Cliff Nielsen, \$4.99. (Young-adult sharecrop sf novel, first edition; the third in a time-travel adventure series "created by" David Brin; other books in the series have been written by Nancy Kress and Sheila Finch.) *Late entry: 3rd August publication, received in September 1999.*

Anthony, Piers. **Xone of Contention.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86691-7, 304pp, hardcover, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, \$24.95. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; the 23rd [we think] in the ever-more-juvenile-seeming "Xanth" series; these novels probably still appear in Britain from New English Library, but the latter have long since given up sending us review copies.) *12th October 1999.*

Asher, Michael. **The Eye of Ra.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-225883-8, 376pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; an Egyptological thriller for the mainstream audience, it begins like an old-fashioned "ripping yarn" [1920s prologue, the Curse of Tutankhamen, and all that] but ends with ancient spacecraft and alien visitations; it seems to be a debut novel by a British former soldier and travel-writer who "is the author of nine books and has travelled a total of 16,000 miles by camel.") *1st November 1999.*

Ballard, J. G. **The Drowned World.** "SF Masterworks, 17." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-883-3, 175pp, B-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1962; originally a Berkley Books paperback original in 1962, then a Gollancz hardcover in 1963, a Penguin paperback in 1965... and many other editions over the years; now it deservedly takes its place among the SF Masterworks.) *30th September 1999.*

Barker, Clive. **The Essential Clive Barker: Selected Fictions.** Foreword by Armistead Maupin. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-224725-9, xiv+576pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror/fantasy collection, first edition [?]; it contains various selections from his early story-collections *The Books of Blood* and from later novels and plays up to and including the recent *Golliee*; the most surprising element here is the elegant two-page foreword by well-known mainstream gay novelist Armistead Maupin; "I can think of no other writer who writes so generously about everyone's passion, whether hetero-, homo- or omni-, rough sex or gentle," states Maupin; "all are acceptable in Barker's dominion.") *20th September 1999.*

Bear, Greg. **Darwin's Radio.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-42333-X, 430pp, hardcover, \$24. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1999; reviewed by David Mathew in Interzone 145.) *1st September 1999.*

Beard, Steve. **Digital Leatherette.** Codex [PO Box 148, Hove, E. Sussex BN3 3DQ], ISBN 1-899598-12-X, 282pp, B-format paperback, £8.95. (Sf novel, first edition; described as "ethno-techno London cypherpunk," this is a debut full-length novel by a well-known British journalist [his previous book, *Logic Bomb: Transmissions from the Edge of Style Culture*, was a collection of his journalism from *i-D* magazine and elsewhere]; Beard has long been known as a fan of J. G. Ballard, William Gibson and Cyberpunk, and those influences are probably to be found in this novel – indeed, Gibson commends it on the back cover.) *1st November 1999.*

Bertin, Joanne. **Dragon and Phoenix.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86430-2, 540pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a second book, sequel to *The Lost Dragonlord* [1998], by a new American writer who has been given the Big Commercial Fantasy push; it's dedicated: "Hi, Mom – this one's for you!") *November 1999.*

Brooks, Terry. **Angel Fire East.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-752-8, 336pp, hardcover, cover by Brom, £16.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; third in the "urban fantasy" trilogy which began with *Running with the Demon* and *A Knight of the Word*.) *21st October 1999.*

Carroll, Jonathan. **The Marriage of Sticks.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87193-7, 270pp, hardcover, cover by Thomas Canty, \$23.95. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1999; to distinguish it from all the bloated BCF which clogs their list, the publishers not only give it a few Canty cover but are careful to drop a lot of impressive literary names in their blurb: "Carroll writes ghost fiction the way Henry James, Edith Wharton, and Shirley Jackson used to write it, deeply imbedded in the social surround, but in a slick style closer to F. Scott Fitzgerald's"; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in Interzone 148.) *14th September 1999.*

Clarke, Arthur C. **Expedition to Earth.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-918-0, xii+180pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £5.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1953; Clarke's debut gathering, containing eleven short stories, it was this editor's favourite sf collection in all the world back when he was about 14; most of the pieces first appeared in long-defunct pulp magazines such as *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, *Startling Stories*, *Super Science Stories* and *Ten Story Fantasy*, between 1946 and 1953; this reissue contains a new preface by the author, dated 1998.) *September 1999.*

Clarke, Arthur C., and Michael Kube-McDowell. **The Trigger.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224711-



9, 550pp, hardcover, cover by Fred Gambino, £17.99. (Sf novel, first edition; another "fake" Clarke novel – i.e. it has been written principally by McDowell – it appears to be a near-future thriller on the hoary old theme of the man who possesses the ability to destroy all the world's weaponry [compare C. S. Forester's *The Peacemaker* (1934) and Bob Shaw's *Ground Zero Mon* (1971), also known as *The Peace Machine*].) *1st November 1999.*

Davidson, Avram. **The Avram Davidson Treasury: A Tribute Collection.** Edited by Robert Silverberg and Grania Davis. Afterwords by Ray Bradbury and Harlan Ellison. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86731-X, 447pp, trade paperback, \$17.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; this is similar to the Robert Bloch *festchrift* which Tor published a couple of years ago: a generous selection of stories by the eminent deceased author, each introduced by a "celebrity"; contributors include Poul and Karen Anderson, Peter S. Beagle, Gregory Benford, Algis Budrys, John Clute, Guy Davis, Thomas M. Disch, Gardner Dozois, Alan Dean Foster, William Gibson, James Gunn, Damon Knight, Ursula Le Guin, Fredrik Pohl, Lucius Shepard, Michael Swanwick, Kate Wilhelm and Gene Wolfe; there are 37 quirky Davidson stories in this big book, including such well-known pieces as "Or All the Sea with Oysters" and "The Sources of the Nile"; reviewed by Andrew Tidmarsh in Interzone 139.) *15th September 1999.*

Donaldson, Stephen. **Reave the Just and Other Tales.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-651171-6, 482pp, A-format paperback, cover by Kevin Jenkins, £6.99. (Fantasy collection, first pub-

lished in the USA [?], 1998; Donaldson's second gathering of shorter work, it contains eight stories, mostly reprinted from original anthologies.) 4th October 1999.

Drake, David. **Servant of the Dragon.** "The third volume in the saga of *The Lord of the Isles*." Tor, ISBN 0-312-86469-8, 479pp, hardcover, cover by Donato, \$26.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; BCF bloater, follow-up to *Lord of the Isles* and *Queen of Demons*.) Lote entry: 25th August publication, received in September 1999.

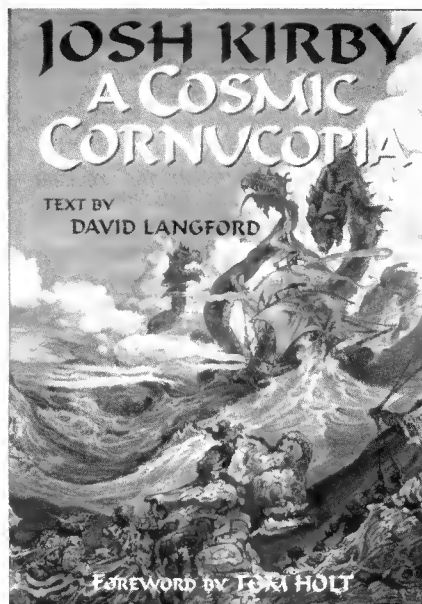
Frenkel, James, ed. **Technohorror: Inventions in Terror.** Lowell House, ISBN 0-7373-0298-4, xiii+296pp, trade paperback, \$15.95. (Sf/horror anthology, first edition; proof copy received; it consists of 16 reprinted stories, mostly science-fictional but chosen for their horror appeal, by Robert Bloch, Ray Bradbury, John Brunner, Pat Cadigan, Ramsey Campbell, Stephen Dedman, Thomas M. Disch, Greg Egan ["Scatter My Ashes," an early story from *Interzone*], Harlan Ellison, Stephen King, Damon Knight, Fredrik Pohl, Michael Swanwick and others; a good selection.) November 1999.

Hamilton, Peter F. **A Second Chance at Eden.** Pan, ISBN 0-330-35182-6, x+496pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Sf collection, first published in 1998; it contains the title novella, new to this book, the novelette "Escape Route," first published in *Interzone* in 1997, and five short stories, a couple of which first appeared in David Garnett's *New Worlds* anthologies; all are set in the same universe as Hamilton's "Night's Dawn" trilogy of novels; reviewed by Brian Stableford in *Interzone* 138.) 8th October 1999.

Hayden, Patrick Nielsen, ed. **Starlight 2.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86312-8, 318pp, trade paperback, cover by Jeff Adams, \$14.95. (Sf/fantasy anthology, first published in 1998; all-new stories by M. Shayne Bell, Ted Chiang, Esther M. Friesner, Angelica Gorodischer [translated from the Spanish by Ursula Le Guin], Ellen Kushner, Geoffrey A. Landis, David Langford, Jonathan Lethem, Carter Scholz, Martha Soukup, Robert Charles Wilson and others; reviewed by David Lee Stone in *Interzone* 138.) 7th October 1999.

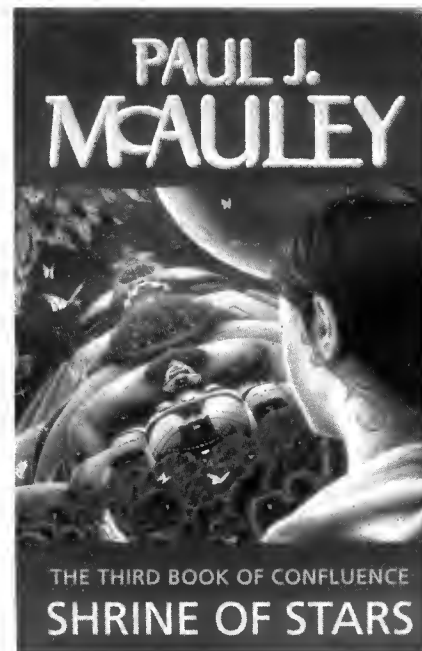
Haydon, Elizabeth. **Rhapsody: Child of Blood.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86752-2, 479pp, hardcover, cover by Royo, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; yet another BCF [Big Commercial Fantasy] debut by a new American writer, this one comes with a jacket commendation from – wait for it – Mario Puzo, late author of *The Godfather*; a crowd of the usual suspects, Piers Anthony, Anne McCaffrey, etc., also have nice things to say about it; the accompanying publisher's publicity letter tries to make out that this new authoress combines the virtues of Shakespeare and George Lucas.) 13th September 1999.

Herbert, Brian, and Kevin J. Anderson. **Pre-lude to Dune: House Atreides.** Hodder &



Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-75174-6, viii+604pp, hardcover, cover by Gerry Grace, £16.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA [?], 1999; the first volume of a prequel trilogy to the late Frank Herbert's *Dune* [1965], which book is described as "the best-selling science-fiction novel of all time... over 17 million copies are in print in 20 languages"; Brian Herbert is the original author's son; presumably he has called upon jack-of-all-trades Kevin J. Anderson to do most of the writing here.) 21st October 1999.

Jones, Dennis. **The Stone and the Maiden: Book One of The House of the Pandragore.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-97801-6, 421pp, hardcover, cover by Tim and Greg Hildebrandt, \$23. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a debut Big Commercial Fantasy by a Canadian author, not young, who has previously written thrillers, some of them marginally science-fictional.) Late entry: 3rd August publication, received in September 1999.



Kay, Guy Gavriel. **Sailing to Sarantium.** "Book One of *The Sorontine Mosaic*." Earthlight, ISBN 0-671-02193-1, 438pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £6.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in Canada [?], 1998; it's "a fantasy upon themes of Byzantium"; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 140.) 4th October 1999.

Kessel, John. **Corrupting Dr Nice.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-893-0, 287pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Humorous sf novel, first published in the USA, 1997; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 120 – "delightful, dizzily but ruthlessly plotted, it is a time-travel novel like no other"; Ursula Le Guin, Jonathan Lethem and Kim Stanley Robinson say similar things about it on the cover of this edition.) 30th September 1999.

Kessel, John. **The Pure Product: Stories.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86680-1, 381pp, trade paperback, cover by Ed Gazzi, \$14.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in 1997; 16 stories, mainly reprinted from Asimov's, *F&SF* and *Omni*; one, "Gulliver at Home," is original to the book; there are also a couple of poems and a short play; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 128.) Lote entry: 2nd August publication, received in September 1999.

Kilworth, Garry. **Shadow-Hawk.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-742-0, xii+434pp, A-format paperback, cover by Keith Scaife, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; it's set in 19th-century Sarawak, on the island of Borneo, and is based on the local legends of that part of the world.) 7th October 1999.

Kirby, Josh. **A Cosmic Cornucopia.** Text by David Langford. Foreword by Tom Holt. Paper Tiger, ISBN 1-85585-731-6, 112pp, very large-format paperback, cover by Kirby, £14.99. (Sf/fantasy art portfolio; first edition; Josh Kirby [born 27 November 1928] is, of course, best known for his humorous covers for Terry Pratchett's "Discworld" series – but his work goes back a great deal further, to sf and other paperbacks of the 1950s; an interesting selection, with a witty Langford text; recommended.) 28th October 1999.

Lackey, Mercedes, and Larry Dixon. **Owlflight.** Illustrated by Dixon. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-871-X, 293pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Barber, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997; part of the "Valdemar" series.) 30th September 1999.

Lumley, Brian. **Titus Crow, Volume Two: The Clock of Dreams, Spawn of the Winds.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86868-5, 318pp, trade paperback, \$14.95. (Horror omnibus, first published in the USA, 1997; the two novels were originally published as separate volumes, both in 1978; they are pastiche Lovecraftiana, in the shared "Cthulhu Mythos" orchestrated after HPL's death by August Derleth.) 6th October 1999.

McAuley, Paul J. **Ancients of Days: The Second Book of Confluence.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-892-2, 320pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Young, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1998; reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 136.) 30th September 1999.

McAuley, Paul J. **Eternal Light.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-910-4, 463pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Young, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1991; formerly an Orbit paperback in the UK; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 50.) 30th September 1999.

McAuley, Paul J. **Pasquale's Angel.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-909-0, 384pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1994; formerly a Gollancz/VGSF paperback in the UK; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 85.) 30th September 1999.

McAuley, Paul J. **Shrine of Stars: The Third Book of Confluence.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06429-3, 313pp, hardcover, cover by Paul Young, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; the conclusion of a highly imaginative trilogy which has been praised as "one of the most important works in recent sf" [Locus].) 23rd September 1999.

McCaffrey, Anne. **Nimisha's Ship.** Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14628-S, 448pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1998; an old-fashioned-looking space opera, partly set on a planet called Erewhon, it's described as "a stand-alone novel"; reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 141.) 9th December 1999.

McHugh, Maureen F. **Half the Day is Night.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-863-X, 352pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Salwowski, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994; second Orbit printing; reviewed by Paul J. McAuley in *Interzone* 91.) 7th October 1999.

Mallory, James. **Merlin: The King's Wizard.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-651290-9, 291pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Arthurian fantasy TV mini-series novelization, first published in the USA, 1999; copyrighted "Hallmark Entertainment Inc.," and the second of a series, it's based on the script by David Stevens and Peter Barnes ["story by Edward Khmara"] for the mini-series [American TV-speak for "serial"] directed by Steve Barron, starring New Zealander Sam Neill as Merlin; the author appears to be American – and in this context, "Mallory" smells of pseudonym.) 18th October 1999.

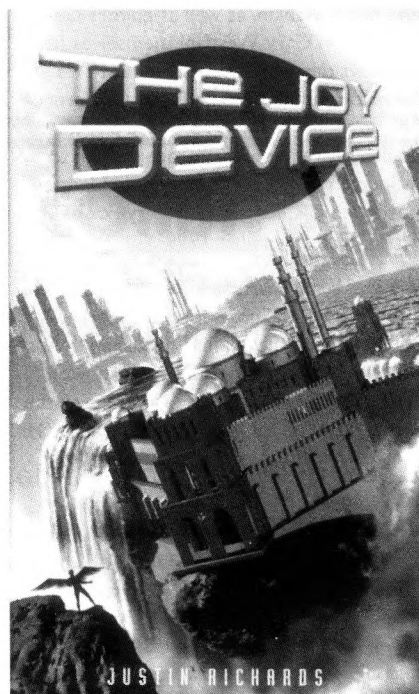
Martin, George R. R. **A Clash of Kings: Book Two of A Song of Ice and Fire.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-647989-8, 741pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1998; another blockbuster.) 4th October 1999.

Norton, Andre, and Sherwood Smith. **Echoes in Time: A New Time Traders Adventure.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85921-X,

319pp, hardcover, cover by Julie Bell, \$23.95. (Young-adult sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; although billed as a collaboration, this is probably a sharecrop [the dedication is signed by Smith alone]; it's a follow-up to the series of juvenile novels Norton began with *The Time Traders* [1958]; "Sherwood Smith" is a pseudonym of Christine Lowentrou, who has also written under various other names.) November 1999.

Pope, Nick. **Operation Thunder Child.** Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-684-85160-1, xii+292pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Ufological thriller, first edition; more "mainstream" sf, this one is a debut novel by a British UFO expert who worked for the Ministry of Defence for 15 years; he is the author of two previous "non-fiction" books.) 11th October 1999.

Pratchett, Terry. **Carpe Jugulum.** Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14615-3, 425pp, A-format paperback, cover by Josh Kirby, £5.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in 1998; the 23rd "Discworld" novel; reviewed by Neil Jones in *Interzone* 141; the publishers keep fattening up these Pratchett paperbacks with large print and thick paper to make them seem like Big Commercial Fantasies, but of course they're not – they're in a different genre altogether, Lucianic Satires crossed with Wodehousian social comedy; Pratchett has now sold "in excess of 17 million" books worldwide, according to the latest publicity update; all of a sudden, British writer Joanne K. Rowling may be a faster seller with her "Harry Potter" kids' fantasies [and seems to have achieved an immense breakthrough in America, something which Terry has not done], but she still has quite some way to go to catch up on Pratchett's sales.) 11th November 1999.



Price, Alan David. **The Other Side of the Mirror.** Introduction by Ramsey Campbell. Citron Press [Suite 155, Business Design Centre, 52 Upper Street, London N1 0QH], ISBN 0-7544-0102-2, 226pp, trade paperback, £7.99. (Horror collection, first edition; a debut volume by a British writer [born 1949] whose stories have appeared variously; this is another product of the Citron Press self-publishing "New Authors Co-Operative.") 3rd September 1999.

Priest, Christopher. **The Extremes.** Postscript by John Clute. Scribner, ISBN 0-684-81941-4, 396pp, B-Format paperback, cover by Holly Warburton, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1998; Priest's first new novel since his multi-award-winning *The Prestige* [1995], it's another of his complex reality-benders, concerning psychotic mass-killers and virtual-reality machines; shortlisted for the Arthur C. Clarke Award; winner of the British SF Association's best-novel award; reviewed by Brian Stableford [a rave] in *Interzone* 138; the "Postscript" by John Clute, which is new to this paperback edition, comes as a surprise and a pleasure.) 20th September 1999.

Reilly, Matthew J. **Ice Station.** St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-20SS1-1, 390pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Near-future technothriller; first published in Australia, 1999 [?]; another "mainstream" action-thriller with strong sf elements, it's set in Antarctica, where something is discovered buried in ancient ice; the author is a young Australian, born 1974, and this is described as "his first novel to be published in the U.S."; he appears to have written two novels previously and to have achieved bestseller status Down Under.) 27th September 1999.

Richards, Justin. **The Joy Device.** "The New Adventures." Virgin/NA, ISBN 0-426-20S3S-9, 248pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £5.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, first edition; it features the galactic adventures of Bernice Summerfield [a former associate of Doctor Who], created by Paul Cornell.) 21st October 1999.

Salvatore, R. A. **The Demon Awakens.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-827-2, ix+607pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997; first of an "epic" trilogy which is commended by Terry Brooks; as we remarked of the American edition: "shouldn't the title be *The Demon Awakes*?; or is the titular demon awakening something in somebody else – feelings of revulsion, perhaps?") 30th September 1999.

Siegel, Jan. **Prospero's Children.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-225835-8, xviii+331pp, hardcover, cover by the Alan Lee, £12.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the publishers boost this lyrically-written young-adult novel as "English fantasy at its finest," filling the gap "between *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and Clive Barker's *Weeweworld*"; it's presented as the work of a new writer, but we hear tell on the grapevine

that the pseudonymous author is Amanda Hemingway [born 1955], who wrote the sf novel *Pzyche* [1982].) 4th October 1999.

Sneyd, Steve, ed. **Dreamers on the Sea of Fate: An Anthology of SF Poetry.** Sol Publications [24 Fowle Close, Southchurch, Southend-on-Sea, Essex SS1 2RD], ISBN 0-907376-15-0. 68pp, small-press paperback, cover by John Light, £2.85. (Sf/fantasy poetry anthology, first edition; the contents appear to be all-British, and mostly selected from fanzines and small-press collections; there are about 30 contributors; among the better-known names represented are K. V. Bailey, Stephen Bowkett, Andrew Darlington, Noel K. Hannan, Robert Holdstock, Michael Moorcock, Brian Stableford, David Wingrove and Malcolm E. Wright [the last-named is the publisher].) No dote shown: received in September 1999.

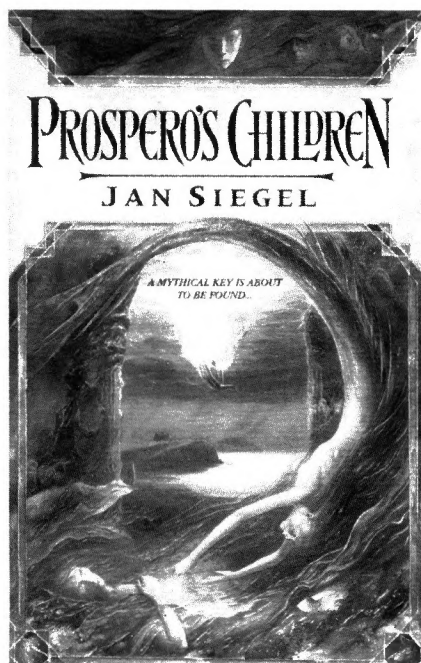
Teixeira, Kevin. **A Virtual Soul.** "Del Rey Discovery." Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-42675-4, 494pp, A-format paperback, cover by Peter Gudynas, \$6.99. (Sf novel, first edition; a debut novel by a new American writer; there is an interview with the author on ten unnumbered pages at the rear.) 1st September 1999.

Tolkien, J. R. R. **Farmer Giles of Ham.** "50th Anniversary Edition." Edited by Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-261-10377-6, xiii+127pp, hardcover, cover by Pauline Baynes, £12.99. (Fantasy novella, first published in 1949; illustrated with the original drawings by Pauline Baynes; this new edition contains a scholarly introduction, variant textual readings, and extensive notes.) 4th October 1999.

Van Vogt, A. E. **The War Against the Rull.** "First Complete Edition." Tor, ISBN 0-312-85239-8, 269pp, trade paperback, cover by Mark Rogers, \$13.95. (Sf "fix-up" novel, first published in 1959; this edition also contains a later short story, "The First Rull" [1978]; on the back cover, Robert J. Sawyer says: "A. E. van Vogt is... to Canadian SF what H. G. Wells is to the British variety or Jules Verne is to the French" – to which we can only reply, "pity the poor Canadians": this is good, slam-bang, pulp-magazine adventure sf of 1940s vintage, but any comparison to Wells, or even Verne, is absurd.) Late entry: 4th August publication, received in September 1999.

Vonnegut, Kurt. **The Sirens of Titan.** "SF Masterworks, 18." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-884-1, 224pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1959; like the Ballard novel reissued in the same series on the same date [see above], this originally appeared as a humble paperback original [Gold Medal, 1959], then became a Gollancz hardcover in 1962, a Corgi paperback in 1964, and so on; and, like Ballard, Vonnegut has long since come to be regarded as a major literary figure.) 30th September 1999.

Watt-Evans, Lawrence. **Dragon Weather.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86978-9, 480pp, hardcover,



cover by Bob Eggleton, \$26.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; more BCF bloat, it's described in the accompanying publicity as "an epic tale of one young man trying to beat the odds and avenge his family after they are slaughtered by dragons.") 7th October 1999.

Westfahl, Gary, and George Slusser, eds. **Nursery Realms: Children in the Worlds of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror.** University of Georgia Press [330 Research Drive, Athens, GA 30602-4901, USA], ISBN 0-8203-2144-3, xiii+223pp, trade paperback, \$20. (Anthology of essays on the role of children in sf, fantasy and horror; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at \$40 [not seen]; it includes pieces by, among others, Bud Foote, Andrew Gordon, Howard V. Hendrix, Joseph D. Miller and Eric S. Rabkin, as well as editors George Slusser and Gary Westfahl themselves [the latter writing with Lynne Lundquist]; it's based on papers from an Eaton Conference held in California in 1993 – it's a pity it couldn't have been up-to-date enough to include an essay on the current kid-fantasy hot-seller, J. K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" series.) 2nd September 1999.

Wilkins, Kim. **Grimoire.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06786-1, 625pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror novel, first published in Australia [?], 1999; the author is British-born Australian, and this is her second novel; the action moves from Victorian London to present-day Melbourne.) 9th September 1999.

Wurts, Janny. **Grand Conspiracy: The Wars of Light and Shadows, Volume 5: Second Book of The Alliance of Light.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224074-2, \$96pp, hardcover, cover by the author, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1999; typical Big Commercial Fantasy, perhaps distinguished from the run-of-the-mill by the fact

that the author is her own, quite competent, cover artist.) 1st November 1999.

Yarbro, Chelsea Quinn. **Blood Roses: A Novel of Saint-Germain.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87248-8, 382pp, trade paperback, \$15.95. (Historical horror/fantasy novel, first published in 1998; it's set at the time of the Black Death and the "blood roses" of the title are the pustules caused by that plague; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 137.) 6th October 1999.

Yarbro, Chelsea Quinn. **Communion Blood: A Novel of Saint-Germain.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86793-X, 477pp, hardcover, \$26.95. (Historical horror/fantasy novel, first edition; umpteenth in the non-chronological "Comte de Saint-Germain" vampire series [which has been running since the 1970s], it's set in 17th-century Italy.) 7th October 1999.

Zahn, Timothy. **Vision of the Future.** "Star Wars." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-S0690-0, 694pp, A-format paperback, cover by Drew Struzan, £5.99. (Sf movie-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1998; sequel to *Specter of the Past* [1997] in the two-volume sub-series known as "The Hand of Thrawn"; this must be the biggest *Star Wars* spinoff yet – pulp space opera lives!) 7th October 1999.

Zamyatin, Yevgeny. **We.** Translated by Mirra Ginsburg. Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-63313-2, xxi+232pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1924; this particular translation [the third] from the original Russian text was first published in the USA, 1972; one of the great classics of dystopian sf, it was written in 1920-1921 and initially circulated *samizdat*-style; because it was banned in its author's homeland, the Soviet Union, the book's early publication history is complicated – it first appeared in English in New York, in 1924, and there were also early Czech and French editions [the latter was the one read by George Orwell, who indubitably was influenced by this novel when he came to write *Nineteen Eighty-Four*]; a quite separate translation into English by Bernard Guilbert Guerney [1960] was published in the UK by Jonathan Cape [1970] and Penguin Books [1972], and it's interesting to compare the two – this Mirra Ginsburg translation is generally reckoned to be the best, although her introduction downplays the science-fiction connections and fails to mention H. G. Wells [Zamyatin doted on Wells, translated him into Russian, and wrote one of the best early essays on Wells's novels]; this appears to be the 16th Avon paperback printing.) Late entry: August publication, received in September 1999.

Zelazny, Roger, and Jane Lindskold. **Lord Demon.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-97333-2, 276pp, hardcover, \$23. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the second of two unfinished novels by the late Roger Zelazny to be completed by his erstwhile lady-friend, Jane Lindskold; this one is a good deal shorter than the first, *Donnerjack*, which was of non-Zelazny-esque heft.) Late entry: 3rd August publication, received in September 1999.

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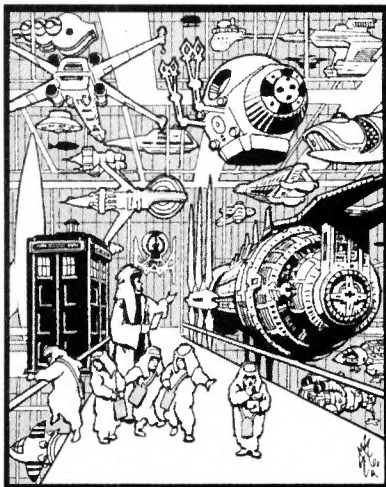
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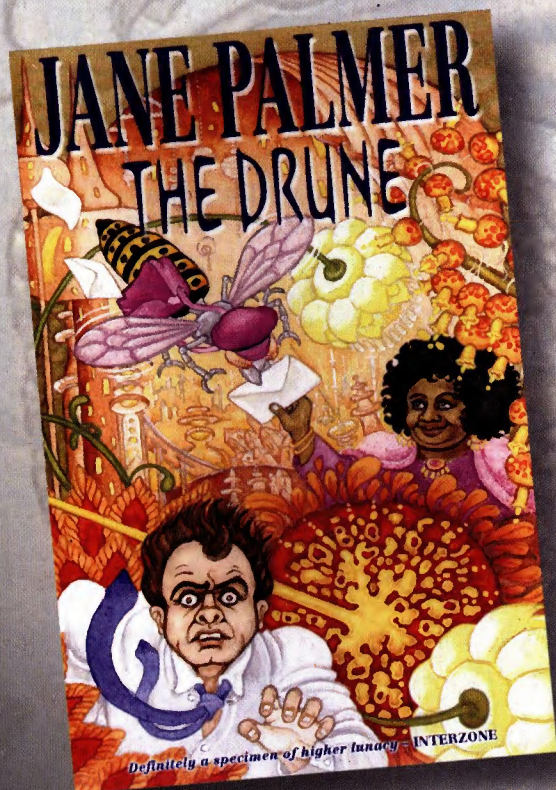


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